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Nº 59 \$8 CDN \$7 US



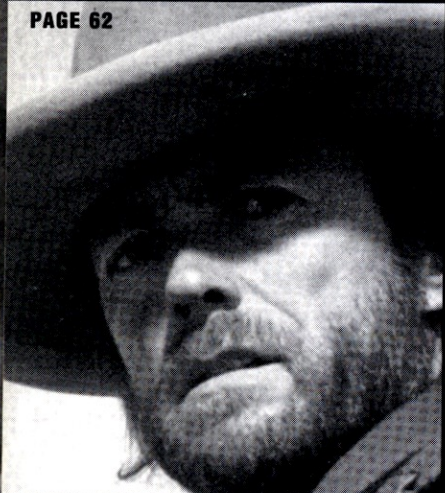


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*CineAction* is published three times  
a year by the *CineAction* collective.

## SINGLE COPIES

\$8CDN \$7US

## SUBSCRIPTIONS:

1 year subscription

Individual, 3 issues \$21  
Institutions, 3 issues \$40

2 year subscription

Individual, 6 issues \$36  
Institutions, 6 issues \$70

For postage outside Canada

US pay in US funds  
Overseas add \$15 for 1 year,  
\$25 for 2 year subscription

## MAILING ADDRESS:

40 Alexander St., # 705  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada, M4Y 1B5  
Telephone 416-964-3534

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We would like to thank the Ontario Arts  
Council and The Canada Council for their  
generous support.

*CineAction* is owned and operated by  
*CineAction*, a collective for the advancement  
of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit  
organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada.

## STILLS

Special thanks to the  
Film Reference Library,  
Toronto International Film Festival,  
Richard Lippe and Lutz Bacher

## FRONT COVER

Max Ophuls on the set of *Letter From an  
Unknown Woman*

## BACK COVER

Joan Fontaine and Max Ophuls on the set of  
*Letter From an Unknown Woman*



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## MAX OPHULS CENTENARY

**"There's not much happiness in pleasure"—*Le Plaisir***

This issue of *CineAction* celebrates the centenary of Max Ophuls, and the continuing significance and value of Ophuls' contributions to the cinema. Aside from a small group of cineastes, Ophuls' work is little known or remembered.

While the contemporary cinema is a necessary focus for a vital journal of criticism, it is equally important to connect to a film art that continues to engage because of its intelligence, sophistication and imagination. And so, this issue is intended to function as both a homage to an individual artist and as a means of placing the cinema within a historical context, an essential aspect of an informed critical practice.

Ophuls' films, produced in a relatively short period, from the early 30s to the mid 50s, remain remarkably modern. Ophuls, who began his film career in Germany in the early stages of sound cinema, integrated into his work the excitement of a politicized modernism that evolved in the early part of the 20th century. While his films are categorized as products of a commercial cinema, they in fact frequently embody aspects of experimentation that challenge their identity as products of mainstream studio filmmaking. Ophuls' complex reflection on film as a medium and an industry, often in the context of his use of narration, and his interest in the star phenomenon, with its concerns of image and persona, on and off the screen, characterize him as a contemporary filmmaker. Significantly, Ophuls' work maintains simultaneously an emotional underpinning so central to viewer identification and involvement with a fictional narrative film. In several works discussed in this issue, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *Le Plaisir*, *Lola Montes*,

*La Signora di Tutti*  
(1934), the printing  
press comes to a halt.





Ophuls' storytelling techniques are geared to distance the viewer, but the films demand equally a close relationship on the audiences' part to the central protagonist which, almost always, is a woman. As the greatly undervalued *La Signora di Tutti* demonstrates, Ophuls from very early on was critically concerned with the commodification and fetishisation of the celebrity in the 20th century; yet the film never relinquishes the director's empathy with its actress heroine, Gaby Doriot/Isa Miranda, and a woman's subservient position within patriarchal capitalist society. The tragic scenario of the film and of many of Ophuls' other works is rooted less in a specific social agenda, but is found in his political *weltanschauung*/world view, that personal desire and gratification is almost inevitably in conflict with social reality and its rigid ideological codes of gender, class and economics in European (and later American) life.

Ophuls left Europe in 1939 because of the rise of Naziism, and although he managed to make his way to Hollywood, and did return to work in France in the 50s, his art stems essentially from the creative environment of pre-war European culture, a culture that was largely decimated in the war. Ophuls' sense of humour and wit and the dark irony that permeates his work owes much to this lost world.

Ophuls' career in Hollywood (which began a number of years after his arrival as he was initially ignored by the major studios) was brief but remarkably rich. The four films he made (*The Exile*, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *Caught*, *The Reckless Moment*) are each in their own ways valuable contributions to their respective genres. Ophuls' affinity for the woman's film/melodrama in particular, results in the extraordinary confluence of director, the star and his material. Ophuls eventually found support in Hollywood from a variety of personalities including Walter Wanger, Joan Bennett, James Mason, and despite his position as an outsider to American society and the film industry, Ophuls quickly responded to the conditions of the studio system and the nuances of American culture, evident in the dramatisations of the details of bourgeois life in the late 40s America in *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment*. Ophuls never abandons his pre-war modernist concerns. The American films, however dark and less visually fluid (in part, a result of budget restrictions on elaborate camera movements, long takes and studio demands on style) still offer a layered, complex narration and a careful presentation of detail as commentary. Ophuls, in his melodramas, remains committed to his oppressed protagonists (both male and female) and continues to comment on the relationship between identity and image.

To return briefly to *La Signora di Tutti*, a film which functions as a companion piece to *Lola Montes*: The film, released in 1934, investigates the subject of film stardom, representation and self-reflexivity and the 'family' romance, which can be considered the essence of narrative fiction film. *Lola Montes* (1955), Ophuls' last film, returns to many of the concerns of *La Signora di Tutti*; in *Lola Montes*, the spectacle of the circus replaces the cinema as the arena in which the heroine's identity and the fantasy image she embodies for the public co-exist. With *Lola Montes*, Ophuls takes a more detached approach and the film's treatment of its protagonist is less romantic. Lola/Martine Carol, in the present day scenes, is presented as a mature woman, somewhat hardened by her experiences. In *La Signora di Tutti*, Gaby, as everyone's woman, is exploited for a variety of needs. In part she feeds the fantasies of those around her with her youth, beauty and willingness to be desired and appropriated. (Isa Miranda is perfectly suited to the role given her striking presence and ability to project innocence and vulnerability.) Gaby's reactions to the attention she receives is shaped by her own romantic fantasies and innate sense of theatricality. Ophuls presents the narrative with a great sensitivity to the dynamic that Gaby seems effortlessly to engender. Her desirability offers her initially an identity/role and leads to a mobility she craves. Ultimately, however, Gaby the woman becomes an image (off and on screen) on to which people project their desires and needs, a source of other peoples' pleasure. Gaby, on the other hand, realizes gradually that she has been denied the possibility of a reciprocal relationship in the social world. She has ceased to exist as a person.

Gaby's recognition, that her significance is in her image, is poignantly (and ironically) dealt with in the film's closing shots. After Gaby's death (the efforts to save her after her suicide attempt having failed), Ophuls cuts directly to the printing presses, which earlier had been seen churning out poster images of her, grinding to a halt. Gaby's great success, embodied in the proliferation of the image (which attests to the extent of her stardom) is ephemeral, tenuously dependent on her existence.

*La Signora di Tutti* is a narrative about the fictional person Gaby Doriot, but it is also a meditation on stardom, spectatorship and the commercial film industry which identifies it with pre-war European modernism. Ophuls implicates himself in this meditation by recognizing the seductiveness of the cinema and the diverse pleasures it offers—the Ringmaster/Peter Ustinov in *Lola Montes* directs the spectacle but is, like the film's circus audience, captivated also by Lola.

*La Signora di Tutti*, and Ophuls' other great works, still resonate because they embody the intelligence and vitality of an engaged artist.

—Florence Jacobowitz & Richard Lippe





## IN MEMORY

**Billy Wilder**  
1906–2002

**Jack Lemmon**  
1925–2001

Billy Wilder on the set of *Fedora* (1978), one of his most underrated and neglected films.



Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine in *The Apartment* (1960), the second of the seven Wilder–Lemmon collaborations which began in 1959 and ended in 1981.



# CIRCLES OF DELIGHT AND DESPAIR

## The Cinema of Max Ophuls

by Peter Harcourt<sup>1</sup>

**"For me, life is movement."**

—Lola Montès

Max Ophuls (*né* Oppenheimer) was born in Saarbrücken in 1902 and died in Hamburg in 1957. Throughout his life, he made over twenty films in five different languages but principally in German, English and French. He also worked in theatre. More Rhenish than Viennese, he was as much at home in French as in German, adopting French citizenship in 1938. Coming from a well-to-do German Jewish home, he changed his name to Ophuls when he began to work in theatre so as not to embarrass the respectability of his family.

Living in a Europe dedicated to the persecution of Jews, his life was a constant pilgrimage away from this persecution in search of production companies that would allow him to create his extraordinary art. While in their day, his films enjoyed a decent critical acclaim, especially in Europe, they seldom made much money. And his way of working was expensive. His emphasis on period pieces, his fondness for extravagant *décor*, plus the swirls and sweeps of his camera all required substantial budgets in order to achieve the desired effects.

While demonstrably one of the world's finest directors, his work is not well known. Prints of his early films, even on video, are hard to come by; and for the most part, even the films that are known are still not well understood. In England and in North America, he had the reputation of a decorator addicted to elegance and melodrama—a creator of "weepies." There was little mention of his tragic sense of life, of his view of the moment as ephemeral and ever-changing. Nor was there much discussion concerning the purpose his elegant art was intended to serve.

While not his most subtle film, *Lola Montès* (1955) is unquestionably his apotheosis. Possessing all the characteristics of a swan song, it is as if Ophuls knew that it

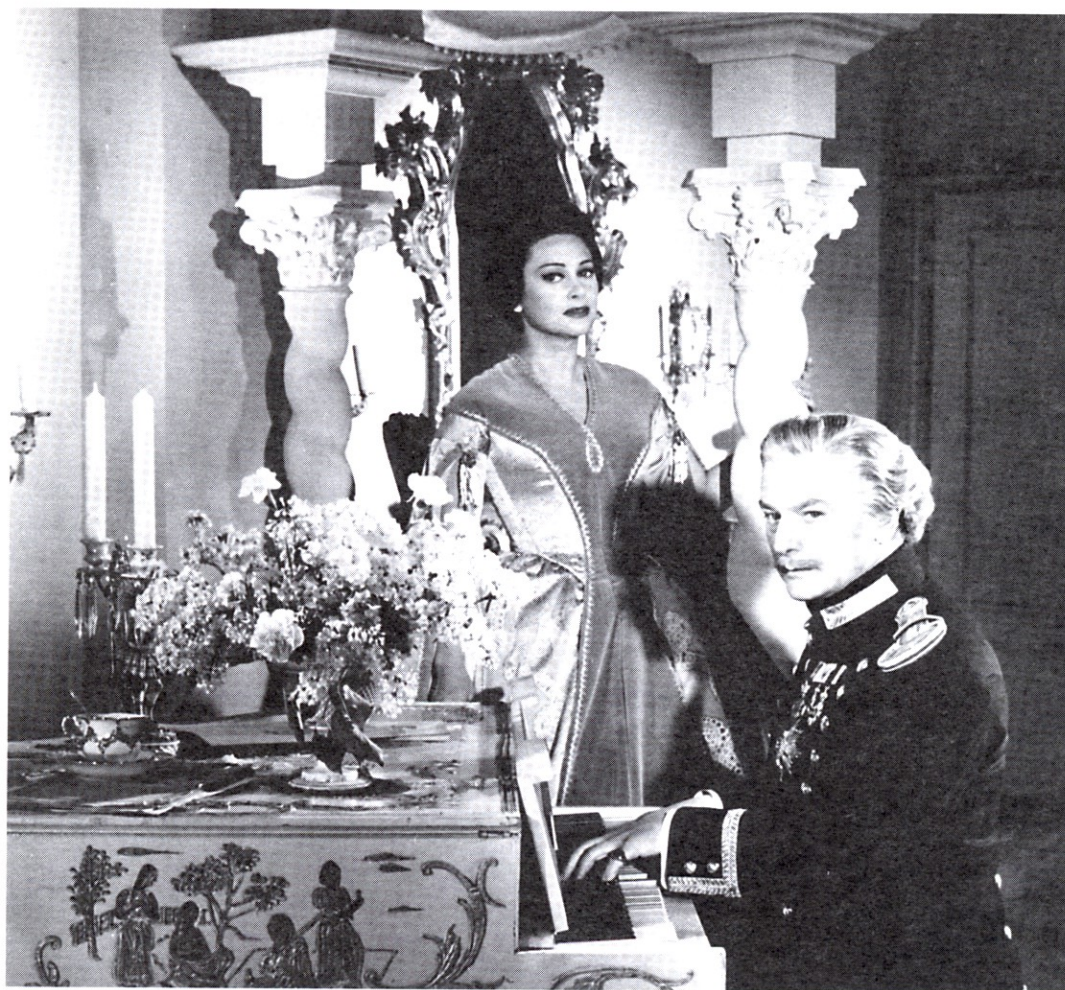




*Lola Montès*. Peter Ustinov and Martine Carol







Lola is entertained by King Ludwig of Bavaria/Anton Walbrook.

would be his last film. It is Ophuls' *The Tempest*—his farewell to his art. Being his only film in colour and CinemaScope, it recapitulates all the elements of his previous work, both thematic and stylistic. It is simultaneously beautiful and bizarre, exhilarating and terrifying—as Ophuls must have experienced the world to be.

The basis of our profession is the circus. Consequently, the true aristocrats of this profession, the ones who mould their bodies, their hearts, their souls to display them to the public are the acrobats and clowns.<sup>2</sup>

Like Fellini, Ophuls has always felt an affinity for the circus—for the “pure” art of the acrobat or clown. Circus performers give themselves to their craft as devoutly as any other artist but for far fewer rewards. For Ophuls, however, the circus involved more than this selfless dedication. It was the ultimate form of

theatre—a theatre in which everything is movement and everyone takes risks, in which everyone has a role to play which is crucially dependent on the roles of everyone else. In this way, for Ophuls, the circus serves as microcosm of the world.

In *Lola Montès*, the life of this extraordinary woman—part princess, part courtesan—is presented as a sequence of diversions, her life recapitulated through a series of stages that finally enshrines her at the centre of a merry-go-round of circus acts. With his whip and top hat, Peter Ustinov is both *dompteur* and Master of Ceremonies. Like Anton Walbrook in *La Ronde* (1950), he narrates the film, inviting our participation, but in a far more sinister way.

After the long tilt down from the gas-lit chandelier at the top of the tent, past the band conductor further down to the curtains through which Ustinov makes his entrance, he walks directly towards us. We are about to witness, he explains, “the greatest act of the century ... thrilling, brilliant, and excep-



tional." If in terms of the plot, Ustinov is thus introducing Lola to his circus audience, in a more immediate way he is introducing the film to us.

He continues to walk towards us through a corridor of young women who start juggling as he passes them, throwing all sorts of things up into the air. Then as he turns left on screen and mounts a small platform, while the camera continues past him and down again to pick up another set of curtains where Lola makes her entry, preceded by a flock of costumed creatures, all dressed in different colours. Ustinov's voice continues: "Mesdames et Messieurs, Meine Damen und Herren, Ladies and Gentlemen," he says, using the three languages that Ophuls has largely worked in, "and now the truth and nothing but the truth about her extraordinary life." Yet all the circus brouhaha gives the lie to this assertion. What we are witnessing is, in fact, a spectacle—a skilful fabrication of colour and movement that creates its own delight. The promise of "truth" is a tantalizing deception. Yet it piques our curiosity and anchors our attention. So it is with the circus. So it is with cinema.

Lola/Martine Carol is to answer questions about her fabulous life—"twenty-five cents a question, the money to go to the Association of Fallen Women." "I'll be alright," we hear her whisper in preparation for this cross-examination, expressing great tension within the role assigned to her, conveying her feeling of being trapped. Most of the questions are irrelevant, having (as Ustinov explains), "nothing to do with the show." In fact, it is Ustinov in his role as Ring Master who does all the answering, while once again we hear Lola whisper inwardly to herself: "I must give up smoking and drinking."

Then a pointed question from somewhere in the audience: "Do you remember your past?" While there is no verbal answer, Lola's face, now in close-up and flooded with red, slowly dissolves into an image moving right along a road beside a river, taking us both into Lola's past and into Ophuls' film.

• • •

What is actually happening in this flamboyant opening? How does it relate to other films by Ophuls and to the rest of this film?

To begin with, nearly all of Ophuls' films provide a merry-go-round of movement. In a number of films there are literally 360° pans. In both *La Ronde* and *Lola Montès*, this element is explicit; but it operates in different ways in other films as well. Of course, it is Ophuls' style, an aspect of his elegance; but it also suggests a more far-reaching meaning. In an Ophuls film (again like Fellini), though the characters are always moving, they never seem to go anywhere. If there is often a sense of arriving, there is an even greater sense of perpetually moving on.

Sometimes they come full circle, like the heroine of *Divine* (1935) who after the humiliations of the music hall, returns to a simple life in the country; or like Leonora in *Caught* (1948), after her taste of the rich and empty life, retreats back to the emotional security of a life of hard work and comparative poverty. But generally they keep moving, often with great energy, pursuing some illusion that finally lets them down. They move from trap to trap, Ophuls' camera sometimes following them, sometimes encircling them—as if part of the caged world in which they live. Sometimes, as with Lisa in

*Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948), they never seem to learn anything from experience but remain the victim of illusion throughout their lives; sometimes, as with the heroines of both *Liebelei* (1932) and *Madame de ...* (1953), they do achieve knowledge but by then it is too late. Whatever the details, however, again and again, this ignorance of reality leads them to their death.

What is the force that constantly moves them on? Almost without exception, it is the search for romantic love, generally centred in his women. Ophuls is very much a director of women. Like von Sternberg in one way and Mizoguchi in another, Ophuls is concerned with women as victims—victims of their own illusions but also of the way they are seen in a world designed by men.

Because the world has given women no self-defining role to play, especially in the past and among the upper- and middle-classes, like the prototypal Madame Bovary, the more imaginative women have been reduced to their own dreams. In Ophuls' world, so often set at the turn of the century, whether in Paris or Vienna, the social codes all favour the perpetuance of a patriarchal society in which masculinity and the military are virtually synonymous. Women are adornments, creatures of display at the opera, a little more prestigious than the men's epaulettes. They are expected to be silly and allowed to be flirtatious, as long as the flirtations are frivolous and propriety is maintained.

No film better illustrates this aspect of Ophuls' world than *Madame de ...*, to my mind Ophuls' masterpiece.<sup>3</sup> Like so much of his work, reduced to its plot synopsis, *Madame de ...* might seem to epitomize the banal. It certainly might seem to depend too greatly on the fortuitous re-appearance of a pair of diamond earrings. But in the hands of Ophuls, these characteristics recede before the swirl and intensity of the film itself.

It begins with a gloved hand pulling open a drawer of a case full of jewels revealing the fateful earrings as we hear a voice mutter: "The trouble is, they were his wedding present." Then the camera travels right, along a whole collection of feminine treasures—more jewels, elegant dresses, and finally a fur wrap. We know immediately that these gloved hands are looking for something to pawn.

Only when the camera returns from its restless search for something that can be dispensed with and we see the hands decide at last upon the earrings do we catch sight of Madame de's face, pertly in a mirror, as she puts on her hat. "It's better to dress simply," as she had said a minute ago. From these opening moments, all contained within one of Ophuls' extended takes, we get the sense immediately of a somewhat spoiled woman who is rather pleased with herself, whose life is frivolous and self-absorbed. At the same time there is an energy within her as she bustles about—the camera once again following her right as she hurries out the door. We then cut to the top of a magnificent staircase and follow her down the stairs, along a landing, and finally through an interior window into the library where she gulps down a cup of tea while arranging her hair. Meanwhile, a full-length portrait of her husband looks down on her from the wall, making her uneasy. We follow her again as she hurries out the door.







Like the opening of *Lola Montès*, this sequence establishes many things. Not only does Madame de's life seem trivial and self-indulgent but the world around her supports these values. We see objects before we see her. We see her gloved hands before we see her face—and even then, it is a face reflected in an elegant mirror. Afterwards, we see her through banisters and then through panes of glass. Material objects dominate not only the way she thinks about life but her actual environment as well.

In their different ways, both Lola Montès and Madame de are encased by the world they live in and seem trapped by the roles they have been assigned to play. As Molly Haskell once suggested:

Like Stendhal, one of his favorite writers, Ophuls sees woman as a creature at a distinct disadvantage in a society laid out by men, but in whom the gesture toward liberation, usually in the form of a commitment to love, becomes far more daring and heroic than the deeds for which the men are crowned.<sup>4</sup>

This commitment to love is what finally ennoble Madame de. While appreciated by her husband, indeed in his stiff way, actually loved by him, she does not feel real with him. But by chance, an Italian aristocrat enters her life; and again by chance, they pass through the permissible flirtations into the depths of love.

Because the sequence which registers this transition is arguably one of the finest in Ophuls' cinematic art, it should perhaps be evoked in detail. Throughout all of Ophuls' work, falling in love has been associated with dancing—generally (apart from *Caught*), with dancing to a waltz. If it is true, as Andrew Sarris has neatly asserted, that Ophuls "gave camera movement its finest hours in the history of the cinema,"<sup>5</sup> then this waltzing-into-love sequence represents these hours at their most distinguished.

On the level of characterization, this is the first time that we see the three main characters together—the General/Charles Boyer, Madame de/Danielle Darrieux, and Count Fabrizio Donati/Vittorio de Sica. There is a huge banquet table on a dais above the dance floor, at the back of which is an equally huge mirror. During the dialogue scenes that take place at the table, we can see the reflection of the crowds of people dancing below. When the General first enters the scene and finds Donati talking to his wife, he seems genuinely pleased. "You'll get on well together," he declares. Then when Madame de is called away by an American admirer with whom we see her deliberately flirting, we cut back to the table where the General is still talking to Donati. From the preceding moment, it is easy to believe him when he warns Donati that his wife "is a flirt. She is adept at making you die of hope." As these words are spoken, we can still see Madame de in the mirror, teasing her American on the dance floor below.

Then Donati asks her to dance and the film's waltz begins, with a tune that plays a crucial part in the film. Whether by Oscar Straus or Georges van Parys (the credits are unclear), its slowly ascending and then descending melody embodies the

longing and aspiration of their relationship.

Meanwhile, the camera follows them as they dance round and round one way before we cut to pick them up as they dance round another. Then a dissolve (and a modulation to a higher key) as we see them dancing again—but obviously at another ball. "Four days without seeing you," Donati complains; and the camera follows them right as they dance past a whole series of pillars and couples passing left in front of them.

The sequence continues in this way, dissolving from ball to ball. But always the waltz is the same. "Two days without seeing you," he says the next time; and then, "Twenty-four hours without seeing you," as we dissolve into the last dance. What is so extraordinary about this sequence is not just the choreography of couples and camera movement (though this would be enough) but the sense of vertigo that the sequence creates. As we see that the couple are growing genuinely attracted to one another, we see as well that they are spinning out of control.

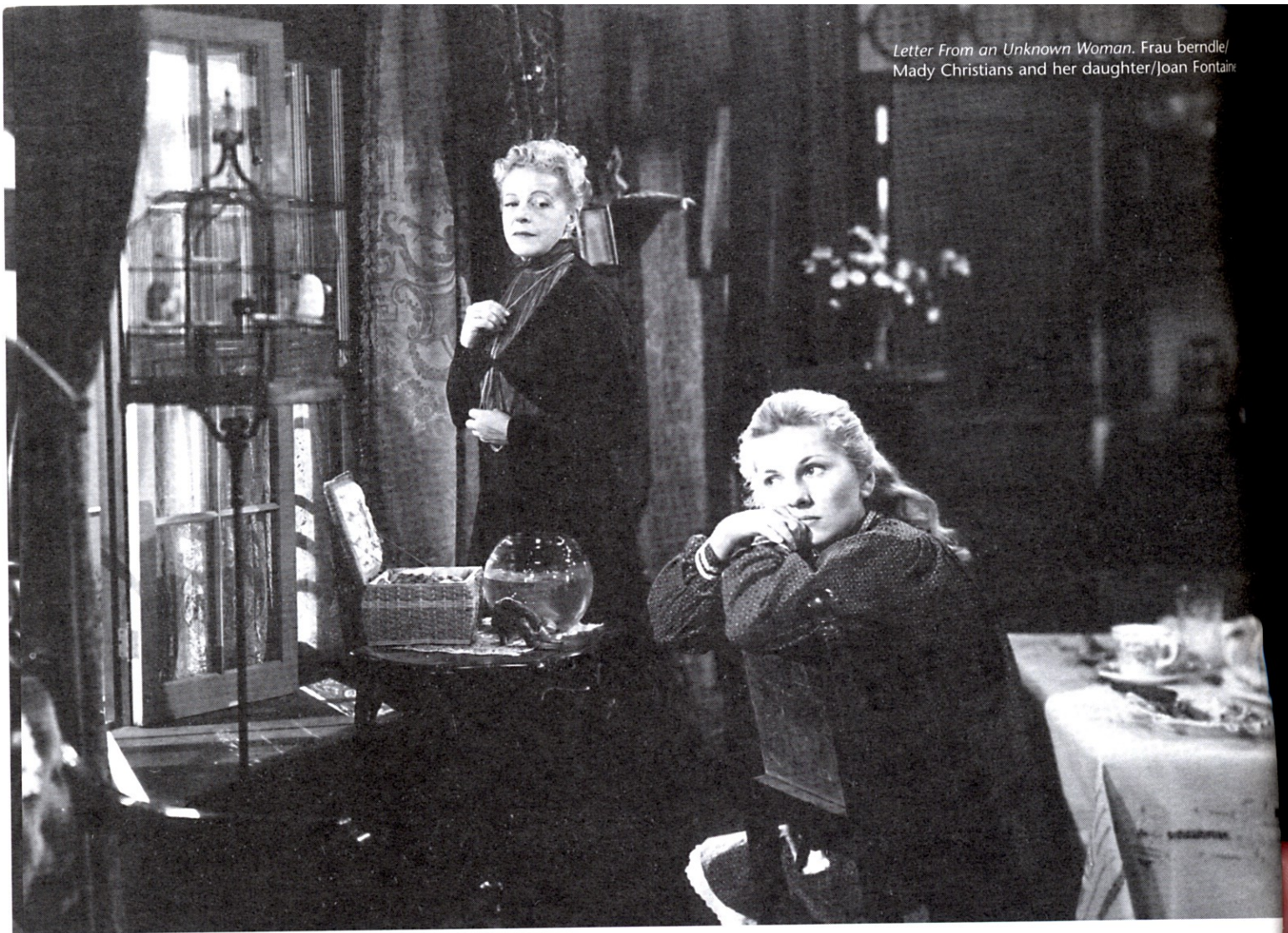
More complicated still is the dialectical tug of other elements in the staging. The sequence begins with a room full of people, with the sense of public gaiety reflected in the mirror and with the sound of a full orchestra confident on the sound-track. However, the final section of this sequence begins with a dissolve to a chamber orchestra also with a mirror behind them; but this time with no couples at all reflected from the floor. The hour is late and the musicians are preparing to leave. Like a similar moment in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, they are getting fed up. "Count or no count, I'm going," one of them explains as he packs up his violin and blows out his candle. We follow him left towards the door, and as the camera pans, it picks up the dancing couple, now very close yet with their overcoats on, a single piano playing their waltz on the sound-track. Madame de and Donati move in left, from long-shot to mid-shot, in front of a mirror but with no one reflected in it—not even themselves.

While the sequence has created a vertigo of joyful ecstasy, in the space of seven minutes it ends on a chill note, with an increasing sense of cold and of disappearing light. "Your husband comes home tomorrow," Donati states, as we pick up a footman, extinguisher in hand, snuffing out the candles in the candelabra at the centre of the room. Then in sharp contrast to all the energetic swirls at the beginning of the sequence, the camera slowly follows the footman in what is at least a 180° pan as he goes about the dance floor, putting out the candles. When he passes by the orchestra platform, we see another musician filling the screen with a dark cloak that he is putting over his harp, as the screen fades to black. As Georges Annenkov has described the moral rhythm of *Madame de* ... :

Thus we can calculate the path followed by their love: from futility to poetry, from poetry to seriousness, from seriousness to silence ...<sup>6</sup>

This is surely one of the finest sequences in the history of the cinema, a far cry from mere "visual frou frou" which was how Lindsay Anderson, at the time it was released, described these elements in the film.<sup>7</sup> It is a sequence that creates within its own style the emotions of the characters—first their sense of





hope and excitement at being together, but finally the chilling recognition that their waltzing dream has ended. A society that lives by such entrenched rituals will not allow so serious a "flirtation" to occur.

...

To evoke this sequence is to evoke the complete works of Max Ophüls—both his view of life and his artistic achievement. At times, life can seem a joyous circle of anticipation and desire, but it seldom allows full earthly completion. It is blocked by social restrictions and then leads to cynicism, despair, or death. Seen in the round, life's moments of happiness are like a dream, their details only a memory. This is why Ophüls so often sets his films in the imaginary places of fin-de-siècle Paris or Vienna. Not only were the codes of behaviour in those days more visible and elegant, but these period films create the sense of a life already past. As Anton Walbrook as Master of Ceremonies says in *La Ronde*: "I adore the past. It's so much more restful than the present and so much more certain than the future."

Ophüls' characters also adore the past, or at least are trapped by its memories. Hence the flash-back structure of so many of his films, from *La Signora di tutti* (1934) to *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and *Lola Montès*. Each of these films deals

with a woman destroyed by the gap between her image of herself and of how the world sees her. Yet sympathetic though Ophüls is to the plight of his heroines, he is too much of a romantic to imply that it is largely society that is wrong. Indeed, he tends to euphemize the social criticism found in his sources—in Stefan Zweig, the author of *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and in Arthur Schnitzler, the author of both *Liebelei* and *La Ronde*. While Schnitzler's Vienna is realistically documented in his *Liebelei*, Ophüls transforms it into the Vienna of our dreams—the mythical Vienna of our imperfect memories.

In this way, perhaps all our moments of happiness are the result of events imperfectly observed or remembered. Although not all our memories are happy ones, the way we recall them determines our lives. As David Thomson has written:

It is principally in the sense of remembrance making up for unhappiness, or fixing tragedy for ever, and of time advancing as exquisitely as his tracking camera that Ophüls is a tragic artist. ... Changing time is the central consciousness, and the subtle ways in which it changes the subjective experience of what happened at any moment is his most poignant realisation.<sup>8</sup>



In all his films, all his characters but especially his women see themselves as acting out through time a series of roles determined largely by others and by their own past. Sometimes it feels like destiny, for there is a fatalistic pessimism about much of his world. In *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, for example, the young woman, Lisa (magnificently incarnated by Joan Fontaine) devotes her whole life to an abstract ideal of romantic love. Unlike Madame de, Lisa falls in love with Stefan Brandt/Louis Jourdan, the dissolute concert pianist, *before* she even meets him. First she sees his beautiful furniture being moved into the apartment: and then, sitting outside on her swing, she listens to him playing the piano. Even at that stage of their relationship, she seems sensitive to his moods—to his discontentment with his own life or playing.

If “chance” played its role in the love affair between Madame de and Donati, it is more like “fate” that sets up the destructive affair between Lisa and Stefan Brandt. This film too would repay close analysis, for the concept of love it embodies is entirely based on illusion, with really no moments of fully reciprocal joy. Indeed, one could argue that it isn’t love at all that Lisa is experiencing but the *idea* of love. In *Passion and Society*, Denis de Rougemont has argued that this longing for love is the result of a literary conspiracy established back in the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> But it has been with us so long that, at least until recently, it has come to seem like an unalterable part of human nature—or at any rate, an appropriate dream for idle young ladies!

If *Letter From an Unknown Woman* invites this kind of questioning, this was hardly the intention of the film. Like other Ophuls films, it deals with his perennial themes. “Time, and the sense of people’s entrapment in its inevitable progress,” as Robin Wood has expressed it. And he continues:

The other central concern in Ophuls is with the yearning for a romantic ideal, which may be unattainable and may be illusory, but the striving for which confers on his characters their beauty, even as it renders them incapable of adapting to reality. *Letter From an Unknown Woman* is at once an elegy to the tragic waste brought about by this immersion in an impossible dream, and a celebration of the triumph of the dream over time; in the paradox lies the film’s poignance.<sup>10</sup>

*Letter From an Unknown Woman* is in this way either the most poignant or the most sentimental of all of Ophuls’ films, depending on how tolerant we are of this conception of romantic love. But if Lisa seems to be acting out a role either determined by fate or (more accurately) determined by the way in which society has conditioned her to think about love, other characters in other Ophuls films seem more the victims of the actual people they encounter.

This could lead us back to Ophuls’ concern with the theatre which has so affected his work. His origins were in theatre, especially the elaborate theatre of Max Reinhardt; and he continued to work in theatre throughout his life. Furthermore, in nearly all his films, there are constant references to spectacles. Not only do his characters frequently visit the opera, but like Renoir in this way, many of his characters are associated with the stage. At the very least, his women become models which,

from the way modelling is presented in both *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and *Caught*, seems for Ophuls a euphemism for prostitution.

*Caught* is especially interesting from this point of view. Like *The Reckless Moment* (1949), his other “realistic” American film, it is far less idealized, far less romanticized, than most of his work. There is also far less camera movement, apparently the result of production pressure, judging from the pleasant doggerel once penned by James Mason:

I think I know the reason why  
Producers tend to make him cry,  
Inevitably they demand  
Some stationary set-ups, and  
A shot that doesn’t call for tracks  
Is agony for poor dear Max,  
Who, separated from his dolly,  
Is wrapped in deepest melancholy.  
Once, when they took away his crane,  
I thought he’d never smile again ...<sup>11</sup>

Even if forced upon him, however, this lack of camera movement combined with Lee Garmes’ deep-focus photography, is extraordinarily effective. In shot after shot in a way reminiscent of *Citizen Kane*, the rich and brutal Smith Ohlrig/Robert Ryan dominates one corner of the frame, while the abused Leonora/Barbara Bel Geddes seems insignificantly tiny in the far corner of another.

Perhaps too, whether imposed or not, this lack of movement relates to the way that Ophuls sees the world, especially the modern American world. The need for romantic love seems every bit as strong, but the means of pursuing it are far less promising in lower east side New York than in an imaginary Vienna. And if, as Doctor Quinada, James Mason is the “good guy” who saves Leonora from the tyrannical clutches of Smith Ohlrig and from her dreams of a moneyed existence, he too bullies her and tells her to “grow up.” Furthermore, the last moment of the film shows James Mason going into her room at the hospital, a moment that ends, not with a tender embrace but with a closed door. So while Leonora has been “saved” and this film, like *Divine*, given a happy ending, there is this suggestion that she may be “caught” again, by another set of expectations from yet another man.

• • •

“All the world’s a stage,” as Shakespeare once declared, an idea referred to in a number of his plays. This seems to fit well with Ophuls’ view. His characters are constantly acting out roles from scripts over which they have little control. This is true both of the people who dominate—the rich and powerful men—and of the people who are dominated—generally his women.

Even his bit players are beautifully characterized in this way, acting out their parts within the rigid hierarchy of the Ophulsian universe. Whether the sentries in *Madame de ...* who have been trained to salute the officers who pass by but who are astute enough not to bother when “It’s only a tradesman;” or the entire retinue within the Bavarian palace in *Lola*



*Montès*, running from room to room and from the top of the palace to the basement in a beautifully comic attempt to find for their king a needle and thread: every character in an Ophuls film is the victim of rehearsed gestures and assumed roles—roles which, as in Renoir's masterpiece, are held together by the Rules of the Game.

In his sensitive depiction of the social artificialities of Schnitzler's Vienna, Reinhard Urbach has summarized this situation.

Behind the decorative facade of official morality the conventions of playacting were established. Role-playing became the life-style of society, not as theatrical, pathetic or affectatious exhibition, not as a play before God, but as a game of individuals with each other, everywhere and constantly. In the world of role-playing there are no barriers of class, birth or wealth. Power goes to the most accomplished player. The society of players claims unlimited pleasure in all areas of life, particularly in the erotic. Pleasure is cultivated as a game, with simple rules, refined forms, and complicated consequences. The partners are stripped of their individuality and become types. Affection is replaced by desire, fidelity by flirtation, and marriage by affairs. A life devoted to the moment replaces that devoted to permanence, constant change replaces binding union. There is empty talk instead of genuine conversation, lethargy instead of concentration, stylization instead of naturalness, associations instead of ideas. The player is threatened with the destruction of his illusion from two sides—from without by the intrusion of reality into his fictional world and from within by the realization of his own falseness. In vain the player tries to avoid fate, which may attack him in the form of love, passion, madness, or death (by means of a duel). In a decisive situation the player confronts the truth that he had repudiated.<sup>12</sup>

While these comments are particularly appropriate for the Stefan Brandt character in *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and to virtually all the characters in *La Ronde*, arguably Ophuls' world is both more serious and more deterministic than a series of games. In Ophuls, the rules are devised by men who are themselves the victims of them and the women are reduced to dreams. Although these dreams may provide their few moments of happiness—dreams for the sake of dreaming like movement for the sake of movement—they are indeed only moments. As the title of an early Ophuls film describes it (which became a song in a splendid film by Godard<sup>13</sup>), this world is a world with no tomorrow—*Sans Lendemain* (1939).

I think that the true goal of an artist is to give us a new way of looking at the world. Ultimately, all stories tend to resemble one another. It's the personal point of view that we have of a society or of a character, it's the form that we give to them, that makes them distinct.<sup>14</sup>

If Ophuls has basically told the same story all his life, he has

done so from a point of view which is distinctly his own. "His elegant characters lack nothing and lose everything," as Andrew Sarris once declared.<sup>15</sup> The irony of this situation creates a personal view which joins together the two elements which, as Ophuls himself has said, are the twin ingredients of great cinema—a sense of "wonder and destiny."<sup>16</sup>

In spite of his period settings and melodramatic plots, his world is paradoxically modern. Henri Agel has referred to Ophuls' concern "to depict the giddiness of a world incapable of finding its centre of gravity, the certainty of settled roots."<sup>17</sup> This sense of uncertainty, this tension between the fluctuations of emotions and the rigidity of social codes is more a part of our consciousness now than when his films were made.

Even Ophuls' sense of *décor* contributes to this modernity. Objects and architecture dominate his world. They get in the way of his characters' lives. Whether the earrings in *Madame de ...* or the fur coat in *Caught*, these expensive items symbolize the dominance of the giver over the receiver. So it is with the gothic arches and metal grills and fences that play such a large part in so many Ophuls films: they both convey a sense of splendour and imprison his characters, conveying a suggestion of the world as a cage.

It is also a world reflected in a mirror as Ophuls' films are reflected on a screen. Not only are there the actual mirrors in all of Ophuls' films but there is also the distorting mirror inflicted upon us by the way others see us, by the way they assume they know who we are.

All these concerns are given their most intense and bitter form in *Lola Montès*. Lola has endured confinement all her life—from the dormitory in the ship when she first sailed to Europe to the cage she is placed in at the end of the film, where men pay money to see her as they would to see any other animal. A natural aristocrat, she tried first to be a wife and then a dancer; but she gained acceptance only as a body, as an object of desire. Like Ophuls himself, she moved from country to country, trying to gain acceptance and to be allowed to do the things she thought she could do; but because she was beautiful, courageous, and unconventional, her motives were misunderstood. She always caused "a scandal," actually starting a revolution in Bavaria where the people rose up against the influence she was having on their king.

If because of their beauty and the possessiveness of desire, women are victims in all of Ophuls' films, they also cause strife. At least three of Ophuls' films end with death from duelling—a wronged husband preserving his honour by killing off the lover, with all the ritual of black carriages and misty forests that Ophuls' art can so effortlessly encompass. If the ritual of the waltz leads to love, the ritual of duelling leads to death.

Finally, in spite of all the accuracy of his period decor, Ophuls' world is immensely interior. It is not what life is that matters so much as how it is imagined. Reality is one thing, imagination another. It is how we imagine events, how we remember them, that gives meaning to our lives. Hence the number of scenes in his films that take place at night or in snow—atmospheres conducive to the inwardness of dreaming.

The essence of Ophuls' cinema is the inner rhythm of his





*Caught* (1949) Dr. Quinada/James Mason comforts Leonora/Barbara Bel Geddes. Leonora's discarded fur coat is visible in the background.

movement, a contrapuntal interweaving of his characters and camera. But this choreography is never decorative. It is designed kinaesthetically to create the shifts of emotion between excitement and fear, between delight and despair, that mark the imaginative rhythms of the most meaningful moments in our lives. "Ophuls' is the cinema of movement," as David Thomson has suggested, "because time and the heart die when they stand still."<sup>18</sup> Or as Molly Haskell once wrote:

Each staircase climbed and descended, each corridor traversed, takes the body one space further towards the grave, and each lilting, contrapuntal swing of the camera suggests the soul's freedom to fly.<sup>19</sup>

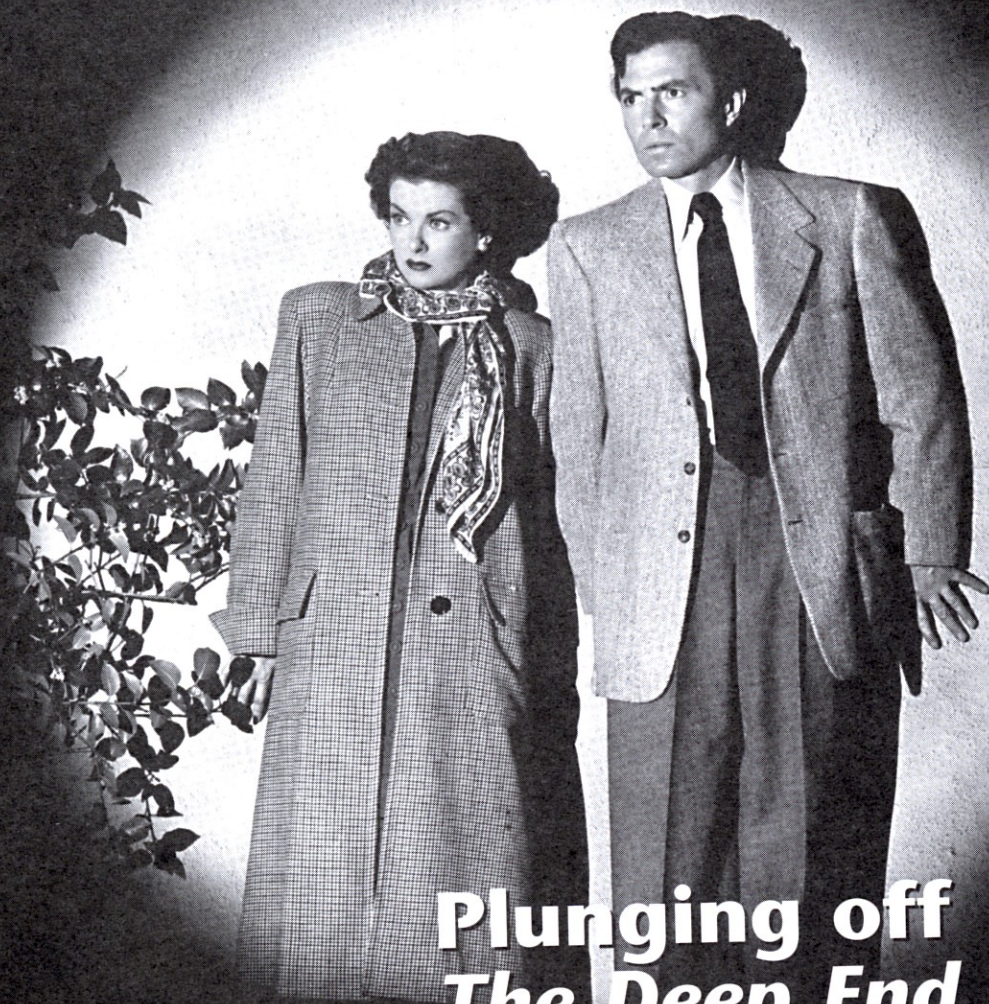
Like all great artists, the work of Max Ophuls has a metaphysical dimension. He is a philosopher of the cinema. With his emphasis on personal style as a defence against the values of a disintegrating society, he speaks to the contemporary world.

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#### NOTES

- 1 This article was originally written for a retrospective of the films of Max Ophuls at the Toronto International Film Festival (then called the Festival of Festivals) in 1977. It is reprinted here with minor revisions.
- 2 Max Ophuls in Claude Beylie, *Max Ophuls* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1963), 29
- 3 For a more extended analysis of this film, see Peter Harcourt, "My Favorite Movie—*Madame de ...*," *Favorite Movies*, ed. by Philip Nobile (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 146-159
- 4 Molly Haskell, "Madame de: A Musical Passage," *Favorite Movies*, 135
- 5 Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 70
- 6 Georges Annenkov, *Max Ophuls* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1962), 68
- 7 Richard Roud (ed.), *Max Ophuls: An Index* (London: The British Film Institute, 1958), 37
- 8 David Thompson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), 421
- 9 Denis de Rougemont, trans. by Montgomery Belgion, *Passion and Society* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956)
- 10 Robin Wood, "The Seaweed Gatherer," *Favorite Movies*, 168
- 11 Roud, 5
- 12 Reinhard Urbach, trans. by Donald Daviau, *Arthur Schnitzler* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1973), 19-20
- 13 *Pierrot le fou* (1965)
- 14 Max Ophuls in Beylie, 123
- 15 Sarris, 72
- 16 Beylie, 126
- 17 Beylie, 181
- 18 Thomson, 421
- 19 Haskell, 138





## Plunging off *The Deep End* into *The Reckless Moment*

by Robin Wood

The recent appearance of *The Deep End* (Scott McGehee, David Siegel) gives a particular resonance to the film of which it appears to be a remake: Max Ophuls' last Hollywood film *The Reckless Moment* (1949), which in my opinion deserves far more recognition than it has received as one of his masterpieces and one of the supreme achievements of classical Hollywood. I say 'appears to be' because, while *The Deep End* follows *The Reckless Moment's* plotline almost scene by scene, Ophuls' film is nowhere credited. Both films credit a fictional source, 'The Blank Wall' by Elizabeth Sanxay Holding, somewhat confusingly described in Ophuls' film as a 'story in The Ladies Home Journal' and in *The Deep End* as a 'novel'. The new film's cinematic derivation was also curiously glossed over (if not totally repressed) in all the reviews I have read, the nearest reference being not to Ophuls but to 'a forties domestic melodrama'. I must not allow my anger at this omission to prevent my doing justice to *The Deep End*: it is a well-made, well acted, directed and photographed movie of some intelligence, certainly among the best American films released so far this year (a swift glance at the competition will counter any sense that that is a great compliment). Beside the Ophuls original it dwindles into insignificance.

The continuing failure to recognize *The Reckless Moment's* status is both

Publicity still  
for *The Reckless  
Moment*, with  
Lucia Harper/  
Joan Bennett and  
Donnelly/James  
Mason



exemplified and confirmed by its current unavailability. (If, like me, you have managed to make a copy from one of its rare appearances on television you can count yourself extremely fortunate). I wrote about the film as a whole in my book *Personal Views* (also, I'm afraid, long out of print and hard to find) and don't like repeating myself. What I offer here is a detailed analysis of one crucial sequence, which will exemplify the themes and tone of the film (so different from the tone of *The Deep End*) as well as illustrating the extraordinary delicacy and precision of Ophuls' mise-en-scène. Those who require a plot synopsis, however, can safely be referred to the new film, bearing in mind the two major departures from the original: the transformation of the rebellious teenage daughter into a teenage gay son, and the total absence of one crucial character, Sybil, the black maidservant. (One may wonder, in *The Deep End*, why this woman, the film's protagonist, living in the most affluent circumstances, with three difficult children to raise, a father-in-law prone to heart attacks, and a husband frequently absent abroad, apparently requires no domestic help whatever, presumably doing all the housework, cleaning and cooking singlehanded).

The sequence to be examined is that in which the black-mailer Martin Donnelly/James Mason first appears, infiltrating the bourgeois home (its equivalent in *The Deep End* is much shorter, with no trace of the Ophulsian detail and complexity of tone). It occurs approximately 28 minutes from the start of the film, lasts seven minutes and ten seconds, and consists of twenty-six shots. There can be no doubt that, had Ophuls been working in complete freedom, the shot count would be far lower, many of the cuts replaced by reframings, the sequence as it stands clearly exemplifying his compromise with 'the Hollywood system' of shooting and editing. As it stands, it contains far more camera movement, far less editing, than one expects within a 'typical' Hollywood sequence. (For a detailed account of Ophuls' struggles see Lutz Bacher's *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios*, a book indispensable not only to those interested in Ophuls but to anyone interested in the methodology of classical Hollywood and the problems faced by unconventional filmmakers). I have argued (in the essay on *Letter From an Unknown Woman* in my book *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*) that we should not automatically deplore the restrictions imposed on Ophuls' Hollywood films by the 'interference' of producers: what matters is the result. Bacher's book exposes the inadequacy of the conventional notion that Ophuls' experiences in Hollywood were primarily of struggle and frustration. He devoted a great deal of energy in his final years back in Europe to attempts to set up further Hollywood projects. One incentive was the available technology: he was as thrilled as a little boy given a new train set for Christmas with

the sophisticated equipment, especially the cranes. And there are many indications that he enjoyed his Hollywood experiences as much as he suffered from them. If he was prevented from realizing many of his desired long-takes-with-camera-movement, or his more elaborate crane shots, his amiable and optimistic temperament enabled him always to make the best of what was allowed, and every sequence (with one exception) in *The Reckless Moment* bears his imprint. (The exception is the scene in which Lucia/Joan Bennett disposes of the body, Ophuls expressing his lack of personal interest by shooting it, very efficiently, à la Hitchcock, with many of the point-of-view shots so alien to his method). *The Reckless Moment*, for all its battles and frustrations, seems to have been his happiest Hollywood experience, thanks partly to his friendship with James Mason. But Ophuls was a man who had good relations with almost anybody.

If he had directed *The Reckless Moment* in complete freedom the film would certainly have been different; it would not necessarily have been better. The film's richness of meaning derives from its being 'a Hollywood film' as well as 'an Ophuls film': it is nourished by a whole system of generic convention and highly developed methodology (which Ophuls everywhere modifies, inflects and enriches). I personally find it a denser, more complex, ultimately more rewarding film than *La Ronde*, a film generally thought of as 'pure Ophuls'. The richness derives large from the interaction between two major Hollywood genres, usually regarded as incompatible: the woman's melodrama and film noir. Its structure is built upon an alternation between the domestic world and the noir world, represented by Lucia's upper-middle-class home near a small town, and Los Angeles. The film opens with Lucia 'invading' Los Angeles to confront Ted Darby/Shepperd Strudwick, which is answered by Donnelly's invasion of the home; in the second half the pattern is repeated by Lucia's step-by-step descent (bank, loan office, pawn shop) into the noir world in her efforts to raise the blackmail money, answered by Nagel's invasion (partly blocked by the heroic Sybil) of the bourgeois world.

### The Sequence

My analysis will concentrate on certain 'key' segments: the sequence's beginning (the first two shots) and end (shots 23-26), and the series of interruptions that punctuate the tense, private Donnelly/Lucia negotiations that constitute its core.

1. Lucia enters the house through the back door into the passage beside the kitchen area (visible through the glass partition). Lucia has just returned from Balboa after doing the shopping. The shot is introduced by a dissolve from the newspaper Lucia has grabbed in a panic after seeing the headline



announcing the (alleged) murder and discovery of Ted Darby's body; darkness has fallen during her drive. Sybil is there, screen foreground, to help her. Lucia tells her that 'the Christmas tree is in the car' and she is to tell Mr. Harper (Lucia's father-in-law) to bring it in. Sybil, sounding slightly puzzled, almost anxious, tells her there is a 'gentleman' (she seems uncertain of the word) to see her, a Mr. Donnelly. Lucia is handing over her parcels, repeats 'Donnelly?'. Distracted, Lucia moves towards the inner doorway, the camera tracking her. She absentmindedly slips the newspaper into her overcoat pocket.

The content juxtaposes two incongruous sets of feeling (and, by extension, the two usually disparate Hollywood genres that collide disturbingly throughout the film, the domestic melodrama and film noir): the domestic realm, the family Christmas, the security of the bourgeois home, vs. the death of the daughter's shady and manipulative seducer in which the daughter was directly implicated and in which Lucia has now indirectly implicated herself, the new sense of potential threat introduced by the appearance of an unknown intruder. That Lucia lives in a state of constant tension, due to the responsibilities of running a home and raising two variously rebellious children within the stifling conventions of upper-class bourgeois respectability, has been evident from the outset in Lucia's handling of both Beatrice ('Bee') and David, denying the former a voice or the right to an arguable position, continuously nagging at the latter for the lack of interest in tidiness and cleanliness natural to a young boy. One of the film's main projects will be the bringing to full consciousness of the sense of entrapment which she rigorously represses, a process for which Donnelly will be the catalyst.

Sybil, and the splendid actress who plays her, deserve comment here. The film's presentation of her represents a drastic break with the conventional demeaning stereotype of the devoted black maidservant. Sybil's hovering presence is a recurring leitmotif throughout the film, Ophuls taking every opportunity to show her watching and listening in the background of scenes in which (because of her social position) she is denied active participation. The empathy she manifests for Lucia is altogether different from the servile devotion to family of the stereotype she superficially resembles but from which she so drastically departs: it is essentially the concern of a woman who is fully aware of her oppression for another who is equally oppressed but unable to recognize the fact. Sybil's strength emerges clearly as the film progresses: we learn that she has barred the brutal Nagel from the home, banishing him to the boathouse. In certain ways she resembles John (Art Smith), the mute servant of *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the point being that their very exclusion from participation in the affairs of their employers (John by his handicap, Sybil by her colour) gives them a distance that makes possible a heightened awareness. The dominant mode of *The Reckless Moment* (and what sets it apart fundamentally from *The Deep End*) is irony. One aspect of this is that Lucia, as mistress of a bourgeois household, is utterly unable to recognize (let alone accept) the sympathy and help of the one person who fully understands her. As for the actress, Francis Williams (who staunchly insisted upon the male spelling of her name) lent

her distinguished presence to very few mainstream Hollywood films (indeed, *The Reckless Moment* is the only one I know of). She did, however, perform in a number of the low budget films made specifically for black audiences. She was also a black activist who went to Moscow to work with Meyerhold. One may I think safely deduce that the intelligence and awareness was not restricted to the character of Sybil. Williams' own comment on the film was that she believed it was the first time a black woman was permitted to drive a car in a Hollywood movie (in the climactic sequence).

2. The second shot is the sequence's longest and most elaborate long-take-with-camera-movement (just over two minutes without a cut). Lucia completes her entry into the dining-room; the table is laid for the family dinner; there is a window in the background, darkness outside, where Lucia and Donnelly will end their negotiations, the sequence as a whole leading Lucia from the apparent security of the brightly lit dining-room into a world of darkness and shadows, the Donnelly world of film noir. Lucia absently removes the newspaper from her coat pocket, lays it on the corner of the table (where David will find it, off-screen, later in the sequence), and begins unbuttoning her coat. She walks past the continuously tracking camera into the living-room area, the camera turning partly right behind her to reveal Donnelly in long-shot, screen right. He glances at her then says 'I'm waiting for Mrs. Harper,' Lucia replying 'I'm Mrs. Harper.' He was expecting a typical bourgeois matron-figure and has mistaken her for Bee. (Note: James Mason, constantly supportive of Ophuls whom he befriended and admired, was probably responsible for the absence here of what we would expect from Hollywood practice, the cut-in to close-up that introduces the 'star'. His insistence on being introduced in long-shot, semi-darkness, and in the midst of an unbroken tracking-shot is especially striking when one considers that this was only his second Hollywood film [the first being Ophuls' *Caught*] and there would have been considerable pressure to 'build' him for the audience). After a second's hesitation Donnelly crosses Lucia to close the doors while Lucia removes her coat and he tells her 'My name is Donnelly, Martin Donnelly. I'd like a few words with you'. He closes the slatted doors ('Do you mind?'), enclosing them in the privacy of the now shadowy room, shutting out the light from the bright, white dining-table. He moves about the room (the camera tracking constantly, evoking a sense of instability), removes a bundle of letters from his inside coat pocket. As the camera reframes, Lucia is still standing near the dining-room doors, long-shot, coat over arm, her face lit, worried, uncertain, Donnelly's in shadow. Throughout the remainder of the shot, as Donnelly reveals the blackmail scheme (Bee's passionate, immature letters to Darby—"Ted Darling..."—the price of \$5,000) Lucia remains still, her only movement the nervous clasping and unclasping of her hands, while Donnelly moves continuously about the room, dominating the space, the camera tracking him, at times leaving her out of frame. Her voice off: 'I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave...' Donnelly, reading aloud from the letters in the semi-darkness, goes to the desk, bends to switch on the table-lamp. We hear Lucia's voice ('Would you like me to call the police?'), her attempt at confi-



dence undermined by her absence from the image.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this extremely complex, marvellously controlled shot is Ophuls' treatment of space, its effect almost subliminal. On the one hand we have been given, in unbroken movement, a tour of the entire open-plan layout of the downstairs of the house, the exact relation of kitchen to dining-room, dining-room to living-room, the various exits and possible entrances, all clear if we concentrate. At the same time, however, the continuous reframings, the camera's turns and returns, become so disorienting that all our confidence in knowing exactly where we are, in what direction we are facing, is undermined. It's an extraordinary effect, at once establishing and destroying our sense of the well-designed security of the bourgeois home—corresponding, we may feel, to Lucia's growing sense of anxiety and dread, her sense that the secure existence (her own, her family's, the household's) she has so carefully (and at such personal cost) striven to build and preserve is crumbling around her. The effect is underlined by the two most obvious decisions evident in Ophuls' mise-en-scène: Lucia's stasis, as if paralysed, contrasted with Donnelly's constant restless movement about the room; the tracking camera and its continuous reframings that consistently favour Donnelly, bringing him into the foreground, his dark overcoat dominating the image, Lucia reduced often to long-shot or excluded from the frame altogether.

But crucial here, in the shot that represents Donnelly's introduction into the narrative, is the suggestion of his growing interest in Lucia, the seeds of his later attempts to extricate himself from the blackmail already sown: his surprise at finding her an attractive and vulnerable woman, relatively youthful despite a seventeen-year-old daughter; the growing uneasiness dramatized in his restless movement; the politeness with which he addresses her, never raising his voice or threatening anger. These signs, so far slight and ambiguous, are developed in the sequence's mid-section.

### **The Interruptions: shots 3-11**

(David...); shots 13-22

(Mr. Harper...).

Does Donnelly fall in love with Lucia? Yes, but not at all in the simple-minded

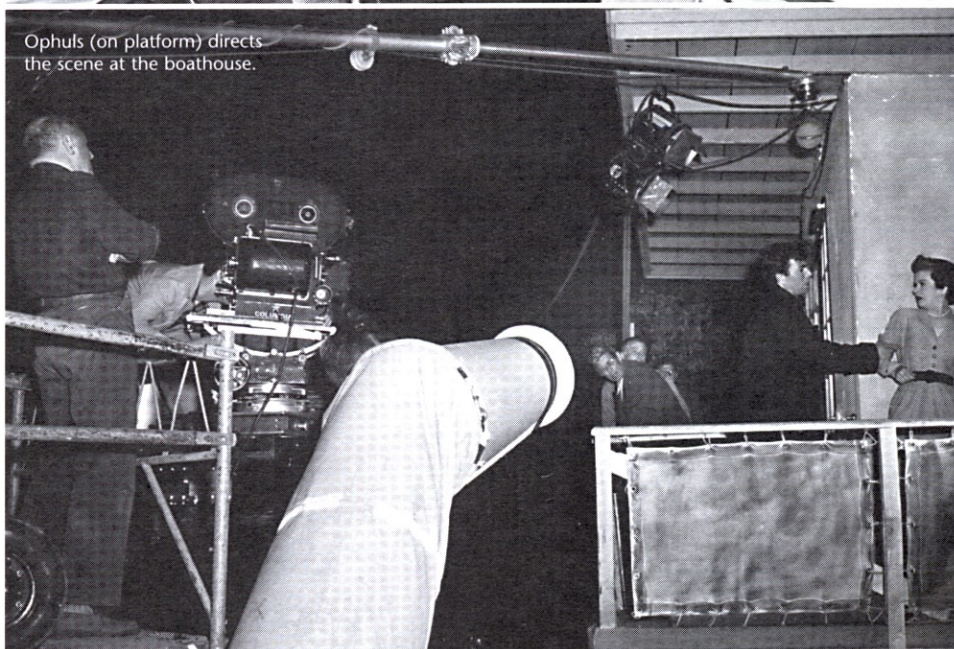
Publicity still for  
*The Reckless  
Moment*, with  
Lucia Harper/Joan  
Bennett and  
Donnelly/James  
Mason



Ophuls (in beret) and  
Bennett on set.



Ophuls (on platform) directs  
the scene at the boathouse.





cliché way that phrase normally conjures up (and which *The Deep End* does not entirely avoid). His attraction to her is rooted in a fundamental contradiction which is a major aspect of the film's pervasive irony: he loves her because he becomes aware of her entrapment (as a prisoner of the family), making explicit the parallel with his own entrapment in criminality ('You have your family, I have my Nagel', as he tells her on the ferry). Yet it is her devotion to family that he loves, seeing her as the mother he lost or never really had (who wanted him to become a priest!). At the end of the film he will be ready to give his life to save her family's security and respectability, ensuring the continuation of her entrapment, at the exact moment when she is ready to break out and free herself through confession (the film's ultimate irony). All of this is subtly adumbrated in the sequence under discussion.

The first interruption places Donnelly as spectator; the intrusions of David (who wants to play his mother his new piano piece, subsequently strummed loudly and aggressively on a ukulele from his upstairs bedroom as protest against rejection) and then the hysterical Bee (who has read the newspaper Lucia brought home and David has carried in from the dining-room where Lucia deposited it) exclude him from participation. For David he is just another adult visitor, arousing no more than mild curiosity; for Bee, preoccupied with the report of Darby's death, he barely exists. We are kept aware throughout of his presence, watching from the shadows as Lucia tries to deal with the erupting crisis in the entrance hall and on the brightly lit staircase, beyond the arch that separates this area from the living-room, turning it temporarily into a stage construction. Mason is marvellous here, precisely rendering Donnelly's complex reactions of attraction and scepticism as Lucia struggles to hold things together even as they begin falling apart, his growing concern for her rooted in his nostalgia for the very concept of 'family' that imprisons her.

The series of shots (8-11) involving the staircase call for special comment. Anyone familiar with Ophuls' work will recognize the staircase as a favourite location (see, among many instances, his use of staircases in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *Madame de...* and *La Ronde*). The female protagonists to whom he obsessively gravitated are always in a state of transition, never quite belonging to the world that oppresses them, never quite able to free themselves from it; hence the recurring leitmotif of the ascent or descent of staircases. *The Reckless Moment* will end with Lucia's final descent into her bourgeois prison; here, however, Ophuls captures her suspended halfway, Bee returned to her bedroom, Donnelly waiting and watching below, her hand reaching automatically for her cigarette packet. Donnelly's awareness here of her habitual recourse to cigarettes as comfort lays the ground for one of the film's most touching developments: his purchase of the cigarette holder in the Balboa store, Lucia's subsequent failure to recognize it as his tender-ironic love-gift.

Between the two interruptions there occurs a brief but crucial dialogue exchange (shots 11-13). Lucia tries to bluff ('She's only a child. Those letters don't mean anything'), Donnelly reminds her that the letters were written to a man who has been murdered ('The police will be greatly interested'). He con-

tinues to read from one of the letters; Lucia sits, listening, weary, afraid, cigarette prominent in her right hand resting on the chair back, the smoke rising up screen centre. He comes forward, stands by her chair, the smoke now rising up immediately in front of him: 'As Mr. Nagel would say, we want to liquidate our stock while the market is high...Mr. Nagel's a good businessman.' Lucia's husband Tom, we may reflect, is also 'a good businessman', a successful architect with his own office, currently bridge-building in Berlin. Donnelly's words may remind us of Ophuls' roots in the politicized left-wing theatre of Brecht which he never entirely abandoned, and of his own Brechtian film *Komodie im Geld*: they break down the apparent opposition between bourgeois domesticity and the criminal underworld, both suddenly linked as manifestations of capitalism and 'business', the various 'deals' on which crime thrives and which pay for the affluence and comfort of people like the Harpers, the very basis on which this particular version of 'family' is built. The contradictions within patriarchal capitalism will become evident in the later sequences of Lucia's increasingly desperate attempts to raise the blackmail money, her descent (bank vault, loan office, pawn shop) into the world of film noir, her discovery that, for all her comfortable and privileged lifestyle, she has no control over money unless she can get her husband's signature. Donnelly is cut short by the voice of Tom's father, offscreen, calling 'Lucia!'.

With the appearance of elderly Mr. Harper (bearing the Christmas tree, in accordance with Lucia's instructions to Sybil), Donnelly moves from spectator to participant. To explain Donnelly's presence Lucia swiftly and rashly improvises that he is from Tom's office, with the unforeseen result that Harper instantly treats him as a personal friend, eventually (to Lucia's dismay) inviting him to stay for dinner ('Sybil's making beef and kidney pie...'). The Christmas tree (Harper's 'Where do you want me to put it?' remaining unanswered) becomes a prominent emblem in the ensuing scene. We watch Donnelly's complex response, the reluctant criminal glimpsing a world, a life, which he is invited to enter but from which he knows he is permanently excluded, his half-ironic familiarity with the figure of the obsolete patriarch (who, because he is no longer active in 'business', the process of making money, is treated throughout the film as merely another dependent): another aspect of his attraction to Lucia and his growing determination to help her preserve the set of social conventions to which she has dedicated her life.

### The sequence ends

After a further intrusion from Bee, Lucia and Donnelly complete their negotiations: she will meet him tomorrow, presumably with the money (though she knows, and he already suspects, that this is impossible). At the door Donnelly, drink in hand, continues his brief newfound intimacy with his (supposed) business associate's father, giving Mr. Harper tips on horse races that are certainties, innocent Mr. Harper never questioning the grounds of his confidence. Then he and Lucia slip outside. The culmination of the sequence is built upon the inspired use of deep focus: Donnelly and Lucia, foreground, arranging their next meeting and the raising of blackmail



money amid dark shadows, while, background, through the window, we watch the family enter the brightly lit dining-room and take their places around the table for the evening meal. The two then separate to return to their respective solitudes, the camera turning, as Lucia moves out of the image, to watch Donnelly walk off into the enveloping darkness.

#### Flash forward: the ending

The film's ending is embryonically present in the sequence discussed above, and must surely be acknowledged as one of the triumphs of Ophuls' troubled, disturbing, profoundly subversive art. (The conclusion of *The Deep End*, which substitutes the gay son for Sybil in the frantic car ride, is quite touching in its mother/son reconciliation and mutual acceptance, but entirely lacking in complexity, and it knows nothing about subversion). I have defined elsewhere what I see as the essence of Ophuls' work, the mark of its distinctness and distinction, as the fusion of two apparently incompatible modes, romanticism and irony. Nowhere is this more fully expressed than in *The Reckless Moment*. Superficially, the final shot allows itself to be read (for those unable to read anything that exceeds conventional expectation) as the traditional 'happy ending' of the Hollywood domestic melodrama (how else to account for the film's repeated screenings on the Canadian 'Family Channel?'): the family is reunited, the external threat has been eliminated. The penultimate shot shows us Lucia weeping hysterically on her bed in darkness, the one moment when she surrenders to the hysteria that has always been there, beneath the constructed surface. She has accepted Donnelly's sacrifice, leaving him to die alone. Sybil's voice calls her to the telephone: Tom, from Berlin. Final shot: Lucia descends the stairs, takes the phone. Sybil (who drove her home, and almost became her friend) is restored to her subservient position. Bee and David (who have been to a movie) enter in the background and Bee announces Donnelly's death. Lucia tells Tom about the Christmas tree. Bee is wearing her mother's fur coat, the traditional payment for domestic servitude; David is for once wearing a neat suit, the future patriarch. The family is reproduced, extended into the future. The camera descends, the staircase banisters separating us from Lucia. She will never, now, escape from her prison, entrapped both by her own conditioning and by the sacrifice of the man who loved her.



Set still: the aftermath of the fight, Donnelly, Mrs. Harper and Nagel.



Ophuls rehearses Donnelly's death scene.

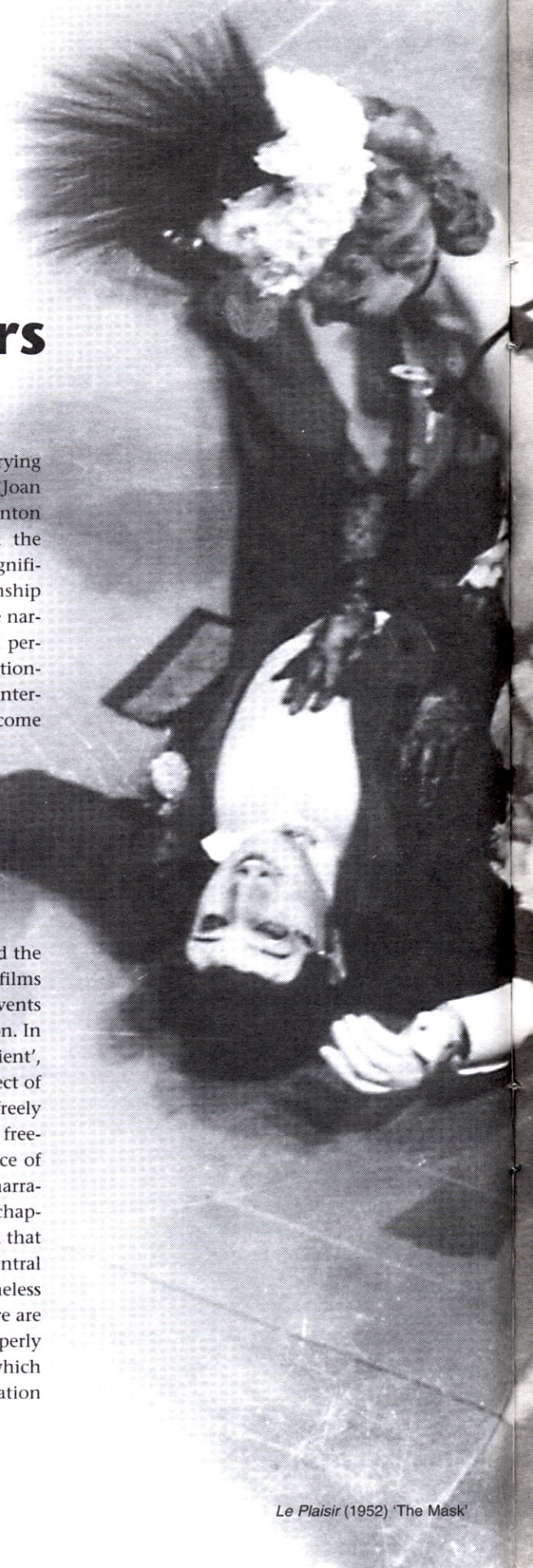


# Falling Women and Fallible Narrators

by Douglas Pye

Several of Ophüls' late films make elaborate use of narrators who are, in varying ways, both storytellers and characters within the fictional worlds: Lisa (Joan Fontaine) in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the *meneur de jeu* (Anton Walbrook) in *La Ronde*, 'Maupassant' (Jean Servais) in *Le Plaisir* and the Ringmaster (Peter Ustinov) in *Lola Montes*. In each film, though with significantly differing effects, crucial questions are raised about the relationship between what the narrator tells us and what we see and (in addition to the narrator's voice) what we hear. One effect is that the films create differential perspectives on events which encourage us to adopt a critical, or at least questioning, stance to the claims made by the narrator, so that her/his attitudes, interpretations, authority over the story's shape and meaning, themselves become part of the films' subject matter. How we should understand these 'doubled narratives'<sup>1</sup> has become a significant question in Ophüls' criticism.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of such an enquiry are what George M. Wilson refers to as 'epistemic' dimensions of the films: the ways in which knowledge about the narrative world is controlled and communicated. If we find in Ophüls' late films strategies that point to the fallibility of the dramatised narrators, what is the status of the films' wider frameworks, notably their images and the selection of narrative material that they present? Certainly none of these films allows us to doubt the veracity of what we are shown and our access to events seems to imply a narrative authority that is not subject to obvious restriction. In discussions of the novel, such narration often used to be called 'omniscient', implying that at any moment of the narrative we could be shown any aspect of the fictional world, informed about any thought or feeling, transported freely through space and time, at the whim of the author. But apparent narrative freedom is not necessarily unrestricted, let alone 'omniscient'. The significance of specific and systematic epistemic restrictions in the organisation of film narrative is the major subject of George M. Wilson's book. In an illuminating chapter on *Letter From an Unknown Woman* he points to ways in which, in a film that develops delicate and complex perspectives on the limitations of its central characters through a highly self-conscious visual narration, Ophüls nevertheless withholds judgement and ultimate explanation. 'In these lovers' lives, there are truths that they cannot at all discern, which the film reveals to the properly responsive viewer. Nevertheless, there are also mysteries about their lives which this and, probably, any narration will not dispel. It is a part of the affirmation



*Le Plaisir* (1952) 'The Mask'







of the possibility of seeing things more openly, broadly, and clearly to acknowledge as well the limits to what we can expect to see in such a case'.<sup>3</sup>

This article pursues the question of such limits by focusing on parallel moments in two of Ophuls' late films: *Le Plaisir* (1951) and *Lola Montes* (1955). At a climactic moment in *The Model*, the final story in the triptych of adaptations from Guy de Maupassant that make up *Le Plaisir*, Josephine/Simone Simon, rejected by her lover, Jean/Daniel Gélin, runs up a staircase towards a window and throws herself out. As she runs to the stairs, the camera moves with her in an extended, mobile shot. Without cutting from the previous framing of the couple the camera swings away from Josephine but moves with her, looking down at the stairs as she climbs and accompanying her movement to and out of the window until she crashes through a glass ceiling far below. In *Lola Montes*, as the elaborate circus representation of Lola's life approaches her affair with King Ludwig of Bavaria, Lola/Martine Carol is at the highest point of the circus tent, ready for the spectacular climax of her 'act', her jump without a safety net from the high trapeze to a trampoline on the circus floor. As she jumps, the camera seems to take her optical point of view and we fall vertiginously with her. In neither film do we see the immediate aftermath of the fall. In both there is a fade to black and the film re-opens on a later scene: returning to the containing narrative framework in *Le Plaisir*, as we see Josephine in an invalid chair, being pushed along the promenade by Jean; and to Lola in a cage, accompanied by the Ringmaster/Peter Ustinov, extending her hands through the bars to be kissed by a queue of men lining up to pay for the privilege, in what turns out to be the final shot of the film.

Ophuls was one of the most self-conscious stylists in the history of cinema, his films marked by the elegant elaboration of relationships between camera movement, decor and action, and by patterns of 'rhyme', repetition and variation both within and between films. To appropriate a line from *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, in an Ophuls movie 'nothing happens by chance'. These moments are intriguing partly because they 'rhyme', but also because in their use of what feels like 'point of view' (POV) film-making, they break with Ophuls' characteristic methods. His films rarely use POV; in fact its absence is almost as central a feature of Ophuls' work as its presence is in Hitchcock's. A tendency to avoid POV filming is one aspect of the ways in which Ophuls' films require us to look at his characters, seeing them within the elaborate material constraints of their worlds. Something was clearly at stake for him to choose for these two closely linked events methods close to POV, to abandon his pervasive observation of his characters and to cede the camera's view to the falling woman.

What then do these parallel moments mean? What significance should we attach to the repeated act of a woman jumping from a great height and to the ways in which Ophuls chooses to represent it? And how do they relate to the dual structure of story-telling in each film—the roles of 'Maupassant' in *Le Plaisir* and of the ringmaster in *Lola Montes*, and the relationship of their narration to the films' images and sounds?

Structurally and thematically, we can relate the moments to strong motifs and central concerns in both films. Movements of ascent and descent are recurrent features of Ophuls' work, with aspiration, striving towards a goal, invariably followed by descent, deflation—or fall. This is an emphatic part of the patterning of *Le Plaisir* and *Lola Montes*, scenes in each repeatedly staged around movements of characters up and down staircases, climbing from floor to floor in buildings and then descending, the camera often following the movements in extended takes. Lola's climb to the trapeze and Josephine's to the window are decisive acts in these patterns of movement, and their falls simultaneously complete and break the cycle of seemingly endless movement the motif enacts.

Thematically, these moments also seem bound up with the women's moral and existential trajectories. Lola's rise to the eminence of becoming the mistress of a king must be followed in the circus display of her life by a precipitous fall. This may partly explain why in Ophuls' staging actions that are properly described as 'jumping' should be experienced as 'falling'. In English there is an evocative cluster of meanings centred on 'fall': 'the fall of man' in the Genesis story, a 'fall from grace', 'fallen woman', and the literal act of falling. Both stories in which these shots occur are about the lives of women who are 'fallen' according to the conventional morality of their societies. This is of course familiar territory for Ophuls, who returns constantly to the dilemmas of 'fallen women'. To quote Susan White, citing Nina Auerbach: 'The melodramatic and exemplary aspect of the fallen woman's situation is embodied in the "one constant element in the myth of the fallen woman, reaching back to the Old Testament and to Milton's epic recasting of it ... the absolute transforming power of the fall"'. Such a view, consistently at work in Ophuls's films, runs counter to the more insistently feminist demythologizing of the fallen woman's state, in which she is seen as precisely not having irreversibly "ruined" herself<sup>4</sup>. Ophuls repeatedly draws on these traditional images of the 'fallen' woman, while invariably developing critical perspectives on the intractable ideological formations and social attitudes within which his women are held.

The parallels between the two 'falls' are accompanied, of course, by significant differences in dramatic context. Josephine's legs are broken and she is reduced to life in a wheelchair—her run to the window and her jump are her last physically independent movements. Her extraordinary action is in that sense unique and definitive, freezing her life even as it brings her the marriage she desires. Lola's jump is unique only for the film spectator; as the climax of her act it takes place daily in the constantly replayed ritual in the circus ring. It is definitive therefore only as part of a performance, repeatedly enacting for the public gaze Lola's acceptance of the consequences of her hubris. Nevertheless, they share a sense of finality, of the active lives of these women being effectively over. In different but closely related ways the falls dramatise that closure.

To reflect further on the epistemic aspects of Ophuls' decisions we need to return to the detail of the sequences. Although the filming of the actual falls is very similar, both



feeling like point of view shots, the camera seeming to replicate the visual experience of the falling women, there is some ambiguity in the status of each, created by the different approaches Ophuls adopts. In *Le Plaisir* the elaborate shot which accompanies Josephine up the stairs is deliberately not POV, Ophuls maintaining the continuity of a shot which begins with a quite prolonged static framing of Josephine and Jean in their final dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Josephine is not seen during her ascent, only her shadow passing in and out of frame; while having much of the force of POV, it is clear that until she jumps, the camera's view is close to but not to be identified with hers. The movement through the window and down seems to maintain the continuity (although looked at frame by frame it probably involves a concealed cut—perhaps to a model shot) and the momentum of Josephine's climb and jump. The implication, therefore, is that while the framing is very close to Josephine, what we see during the fall is not POV (the shot's status as separate from Josephine has not changed). But the experience of watching is that our view is barely distinguishable from that of the falling woman.

In *Lola Montes*, the build up to the jump alternates medium close-ups of Lola, showing her evident distress, with shots of the circus ring far below. A cut to close up shows her raising her arms and falling forward, the camera seeming very briefly to tilt with her. There are several blurred frames before the clear framing of the fall towards the circus floor. The feeling of POV is very strong, though without the status of the shot having been unambiguously established.

In their contexts, then, the shots are immediately striking and involving but their effects are paradoxical. It is noticeable, for instance, that Ophuls does not use the conventional ABA structure of the POV figure, so that although we to some extent share the character's visual field we do not alternate views of and views with her. In neither case does Ophuls introduce the 'falling' shot by means of a conventional shot of the character's look out of frame or return to the character during or at the end of the fall. This is very clear in *Le Plaisir*, but even in the apparently more conventional build-up in *Lola Montes* the effect of the editing is very odd, as though Ophuls wants to evoke, without embracing, a familiar editing strategy. The overhead shots of the circus ring seem at first sight to be POV yet in the shots of Lola her eyes alternate between moving in panic and being actually shut. None of the three static overhead shots is unambiguously attached to her looking down, as it would be in a more conventional handling of POV. When she finally falls forward, her eyes are closed. If we take the film to be using the POV figure, the handling seems clumsy, precisely because Lola's eye-line does not emphatically cue the POV shot, and clumsiness is not something we tend to associate with Ophuls. It is at least possible that what he is doing is precisely to refuse the familiar pattern. The avoidance of these conventional frames for the POV shot, normally used to bind the shot into a flow of action and a familiar dissection of space, makes the effect of the final shot in each case doubly unusual—almost as though the filmic effect of subjective vision were being alluded to rather than fully embraced. This is to suggest that in more than one way the use of these shots feels—and

seems intended to feel—highly self-conscious.

These thoughts make it difficult to associate the shots at all straightforwardly with ideas of 'identification'. We might be tempted by the vividness of the effect of falling to override the details of Ophuls' treatment and to assert that we 'identify' with the women as they fall but Ophuls seems to want to withhold the familiar experience of closeness which the conventional POV figure often provides. His camera retains vestiges of its usual separation from its subjects while nevertheless taking on what is for Ophuls an unusually close visual association with a character's experience. If the details of Ophuls' decision-making allow us to make and maintain this distinction, they may also provide small but telling examples of a hesitation in the methods he uses to construct his fictional world about what can be known and what can be shared—in this case an unwillingness to pretend that the gap between character and spectator can be closed, even at those moments at which Ophuls wants the spectator's view to be most closely associated with the women.

A less ambiguous consequence of Ophuls' decisions is noted by V.E.Perkins in a discussion of *Lola Montes*: "... while [the subjective shot] involves us vividly and immediately in Lola's plunge to earth, it also means that we do not see Lola falling."<sup>6</sup> We are denied the view of Lola's descent enjoyed by the circus spectator. In fact in both films, while visually we share the fall with the women, one effect of Ophuls' method is that they themselves entirely leave the visual field at these climactic moments. At their moments of greatest intensity and danger we are not allowed to see them either during or after they fall. These seem important perceptual and epistemic gaps, as though in some strange way their acts make them, momentarily, unrepresentable. This seems a significant issue in films which are so dominated by women as objects of the camera's look and which analyse the extreme social limitations within which women are able to act.

The perceptual gap (we do not see the women fall) takes on additional resonance in films which both seem preoccupied in various other ways with what can be known, what claims about our knowledge and understanding can be sustained. To pose this more directly in terms of the telling of stories, the making of fictions: Ophuls seems to be exploring one of the ground rules of most fiction, the authority of the story-teller.

In an earlier discussion of *Le Plaisir*<sup>7</sup> I argued that in *La Ronde* and *Le Plaisir* the layering of narration which foregrounds and problematises the relationship between narration and fictional world is further complicated by Ophuls' use of adaptation—the events and characters already existing in their literary originals, their trajectories defined in advance. In these ways Ophuls detaches himself from responsibility for the stories themselves—almost as though he was quoting—while as a result of his processes of adaptation the act of storytelling, of bringing a fiction into existence, becomes part of the material the films present and work on.<sup>8</sup> Although not based on a distinguished literary original, in *Lola Montes* the historical figure of Lola allows for a parallel distance on the film's material, which is presented as variations on episodes from a notorious life, within an even more emphatic double narrative. One way





*Le Plaisir*. 'Maison Tellier' Joëlle Jay and Danielle Darrieux

of describing the result might be that the stories are *presented*, not just *represented*—the events, their mode of telling and even the interpretative frameworks they contain, inviting sceptical attention. The subject of the films becomes not just three stories by Maupassant, or the story of *Lola Montes*, but the telling of these stories.

Across the triptych that is *Le Plaisir*, Ophuls develops increasingly acute questions about the narrator and his understanding of events. Each of the stories begins with an event that requires explanation: the strange masked figure dancing with the professional dancers in 'The Mask'; the mysteriously closed brothel in 'Maison Tellier'; the invalid woman being pushed along the beach in 'The Model'. We are then led, conventionally enough, into explanations that make up the central events of each story. But Ophuls' invention of 'Maupassant' as the individualised narrator creates the basis of the film's 'double narrative', providing a dimension missing in the original stories.

The narrator is amiable, even playful, but detached, anonymous but authoritative. As a piece of story telling on the part of the narrator, 'The Mask' seems fairly conventional, presented to us as a moral tale about desire and age. While Ophuls' extraordinary *mise en scène* cannot be identified with the relatively sparse commentary of the narrator, the voice-over seems in control of the unpeeling layers of explanation. It seems to guide us into the dance-hall, to the back-stage area to which the masked dancer is carried, then with the doctor as he takes the old man home to his tenement, where we hear from his wife the story of his life and his compulsive dancing. As the doctor prepares to return to the dance, chilled by the story but not deterred from his own pursuit of sexual pleasure, the narrator observes that he left reflecting on the 'eternal drama that is acted out daily'.

There are no overt indications here that we should be sceptical of the narrator's authority or his interpretation of events. Yet his thematic summary and detached commentary lack the extraordinary exuberance, the dramatised details of social life and individual character, of the film's images. When he reduces what we have witnessed to an example of 'eternal drama' we should possibly hesitate to accept his words at face value. Have we seen no more than that? At the same time, although the story is centrally about the compulsions of male desire and is told by a male story teller, the wife's role as a kind of embedded narrator is crucial to our understanding and our point of view. The narrator's view of women seems, implicitly, little different from the doctor's or the dancer's—they are reduced largely to objects of male desire, pursued and discarded. The wife's narrative cuts across the dominant male voices and attitudes of the episode to give voice to another story (hers) and an alternative point of view, that are articulated by the film but which seem of little significance to the narrator.

The world of 'Maison Tellier' is much more complexly created and the issues of narration are correspondingly elaborated. 'Maupassant' again leads us from the initial mystery of the closed brothel to the explanation, claiming both knowledge of events and the ability authoritatively to interpret them. Here, he is, at times, also strikingly in sympathy with the mood of the characters, as when he evokes the atmosphere of the countryside at night and describes the congregation's experience of transcendent spirituality during the confirmation service. In close analysis it is possible to identify a number of ways in which the narrator's words may be qualified by the *mise en scène* but the issues of epistemic limits and the two levels of narration are most obviously raised by the famous visual presentation of the brothel itself. As I argued in *Movie 29/30*, nothing in the verbal narration suggests that 'Maupassant' regards





*Le Plaisir*. 'The Model' Simone Simon and Daniel Gelin

his knowledge of the story or its world as limited. There is no reason in his terms why the interior of the brothel should not be shown. Yet Ophuls' camera remains insistently outside, craning around the walls and offering glimpses through windows, but never entering the building.

This strange and striking decision can only be fully investigated within the overall systems of the episode. For the purposes of this much more limited discussion, what is immediately significant is the disparity between 'Maupassant's' assumed 'omniscience' and the emphatic refusal of the images to claim the same unlimited access to the film's world. The film can move us through space and time, following the narrator as he tells the story; it can go into other houses, into the church, the camera can move independently of characters or with them, but it will not take us into the brothel. In marking limits to its own overall access to the fictional world that has been created on the basis of the original story it implicitly challenges the claims to knowledge that 'Maupassant' makes. I associate this difference between the two levels of the 'doubled narrative' with the film's developing subject of men's pursuit of women and their reduction to objects of desire. However nuanced and humane 'Maupassant's' response to the events of *Maison Tellier*, he is shown to be complicit in these attitudes. The film's external view of the brothel marks its hesitation in sharing this confident male view of how the world is. The emphatic sense of the women's enclosure or entrapment that is one effect of these views is among the ways in which the film (as opposed to 'Maupassant') marks its recognition of the price at which the celebration that ends the story has been bought. Simultaneously, the film firmly but discretely sets limits to what it claims to know of these characters' lives.

'The Model' makes these matters much more explicit. The 'Maupassant' figure, who remains simply a voice in the first

two stories, is now embodied in the character of Jean's cynical friend. By 'lending my voice' to a character in the story, in effect 'Maupassant' identifies his viewpoint with that of the character, while the film allows the spectator a more detached and critical relationship to the narrator. He appears both in the framing 'present', watching as Jean pushes Josephine's invalid chair along the promenade and telling the couple's story to his companion, and in the story itself. In this episode alone he has in common with Ustinov in *Lola Montes* the dual role of narrator and participant in the drama, the duality which brings to the foreground of each film the question of these men's reliability as tellers of the women's stories.

If the embodied storyteller now becomes an obvious part of the film's subject matter and subject to its critical view, he can also be seen as paralleling Ophuls, the controlling figure behind the film. Ophuls *presents* Maupassant's story being told to a listener within the film's world. The fallibility of 'Maupassant' dramatises issues of selection, knowledge, ideological viewpoint, that are inherent in any act of storytelling, including Ophuls'. Part of the fascination of *The Model* lies in the way Ophuls develops these reflections on narration through an extraordinary tension between complicity with 'Maupassant' and rejection of his viewpoint.

Distance is immediately established by the persona of the narrator—isolated, detached, sardonic. His initial commentary asserts an emphatically superior, masculine, view of the world—women are irritatingly un-knowable, their emotional honesty baffling male logic. This is a conventional, dismissive, attitude to women based on the familiar opposition between male rationality and female emotion. While acknowledging the difficulty of knowing women it emphatically registers male superiority. His telling of the story will become an illustration of this world view, a sad example of the immutable way things



are between men and women—a kind of moral tale, told from a position of superior wisdom.

In turn, the film presents this telling and analyses something of the conditions which produce 'Maupassant's' attitudes. The opening of the embedded narrative establishes the reflective distance from which we will view the events, the camera moving from Jean and the narrator in the Museum to follow Jean's pursuit of Josephine up one staircase, and adjusting to frame the second staircase on which the couple reappears. The movement also firmly enacts the deflection of Jean's gaze from the statues he was sketching to Josephine. What might initially seem like the escape from tedious academic drawing via desire into love is shown in the next sequence—Josephine posing in an elaborate studio setting—to be nothing of the sort. Josephine is defined by her position as model and Jean's desire is inseparable from producing the woman as the subject of his painting—which is to say as an object for his gaze.

This is a perspective that the film provides visually and develops by showing us the art gallery, where Jean's 'new way of painting' produces Josephine's image as a commodity to be sold. Her human reality is reduced to a body to be sexually possessed and an appearance to be captured on canvas. The commentary offered by the narrator over the early scenes is significantly different in that it is about the folly of desire being mistaken for love. The film does not deny the narrator's cynical reading of the inevitable parabola of male desire, but it is the film which offers the spectator an analysis of romantic love, from the captured gaze in which the woman becomes an object of desire, to idealised contemplation, to sexual possession and disenchantment. And it is the film, not the narrator, which shows the consequences for the woman of this destructive process—her apparent helplessness within a system in which she is condemned to have no power of action independent of male desire. The story-teller's narration, becomes, in fact, part of the prevailing ideological context which the film presents for our scrutiny.

The role of the narrator within the story's social world is crystallised in the scene of Josephine's visit to the apartment to confront Jean. Acting as Jean's friend, he takes Josephine aside to explain to her the ways of the world: she must not make a fuss because, in the way these things inevitably go, Jean's family is insisting that he marries a suitable young lady. We have no reason to believe that this is anything more than a convenient fiction, designed to make Josephine accept her fate, but, whatever the validity of the story, it aligns the narrator with a view of the world as intractably ruled by bourgeois values. There is, he implies, no escape from the demands of family and respectable marriage; to accept this is simply to accept reality. He offers this homily to Josephine as he begins to play the piano. When Ophüls cuts to the outer room on Josephine's exit, the piano playing continues and, in a remarkable decision, breaks into the music which accompanied the dance in 'The Mask' and the final moments of 'Maison Tellier'—music associated specifically with the 'pleasure' of the film's title—the sexual pursuit of women by men. In 'Maison Tellier' the distance of the film from the festive atmosphere pervading the

brothel is carried by the exterior viewpoint the camera maintains. By playing the music, the narrator, who presents himself in the containing framework of the story as detached and superior to the follies of the world, is here definitively revealed as wholly complicit with the reactionary and destructive forces governing the social world that Ophüls presents to the film's spectator.

The film's distance from those views is inherent in Ophüls' treatment of the rest of the scene. Josephine's confrontation with the totally immovable Jean leaves her with only two choices—to leave and accept the situation, or to carry out her threat to kill herself. To leave would be to accept that she is powerless and defeated. Suicide could equally be seen as an admission of defeat but here it is turned into an extraordinary assertion of independence, even as it defines the appalling limits within which she is free to act, and the dreadful consequences of such action. Up to the moment of her decision, Ophüls has framed the action in a static, observational take. In moving with her, the camera in a sense embraces her act, abandoning its observational mode. To this extent, at least, it 'identifies' with Josephine's action. But in doing so it also allows Josephine to leave the frame. Her movement motivates the camera's but the camera can no longer see her.

*Lola Montes* embeds the dramatised narrator at the heart of the film's world and makes him a central participant in the drama. In a sense, the ringmaster combines aspects of the roles of Jean and the narrator in 'The Model'—he is in love with Lola but also tells her story, and in telling it, makes her body a spectacle to be commercially exploited. This is the most extreme version of the compromised and fallible narrator in Ophüls' work—an extraordinarily corrosive view of the relationship between the storyteller and his material, even as it acknowledges the pathos of the ringmaster's position.

The circus itself is realized with great density and imaginative power, its images more resonant and memorable than those of most of the 'flashback' sequences of Lola's life—a thought that suggests which aspects of the film most engaged Ophüls. But its spectacle has none of the connotations of anarchic pleasure and freedom from everyday restriction that circus can readily embody. Here the film creates, in Andrew Britton's words, 'a quite extraordinary image of capitalist society in which economic, ideological and social relations are beautifully and complexly co-ordinated'<sup>9</sup>, at the centre of which is the largely immobile figure of Lola, contained and displayed as the focus of this hyperbolic spectacle devoted to the idea of female transgression and scandal. Everything in the circus is eloquent of entrapment—most obviously Lola's, but also the ringmaster's. He may dominate and control the performance but he is an employee, a functionary of the circus, the owner of which, himself a clown, we see on a number of occasions 'back-stage'. As a place of spectacle and story-telling, the circus is also a metaphor for cinema, and the ringmaster—in his economic as well as his authorial position—not merely a story-teller but a remarkably grim and self-critical portrayal of a film director.

The circus makes overt the constructedness of the spectacle and the story, so that telling and artifice are constantly foregrounded—its actors held within pre-determined roles in the



*Lola Montès* (1955) Peter Ustinov and Martine Carol





unfolding performance. At the same time, the basis of the circus presentation of Lola is to promise the paying public access to Lola herself and to the truth about her life. Yet it is made repeatedly clear that no such immediate access and no such authenticity are available to the public. The ringmaster selects only the audience questions he wants to use; he speaks repeatedly for Lola; the audience sees only the factitious and selective reconstructions of her scandalous life.

Because these issues are so central to the circus framework and the circus seems to invite a reading as metaphor for cinema, the status of the non-circus sequences takes on particular importance. Triggered quite explicitly by Lola's memory at the outset but offering perspectives which cannot be identified with her subjectivity (the needle and thread episode is a major example), how do they relate as representations to the circus and to the 'reality' of Lola's life? This is also to ask how the authority that offers us the flashbacks is linked to and/or differentiated from the ringmaster/'director'.

In a way we might see Ophüls as teasing the film spectator almost as the ringmaster teases the circus audience, with the promise of the truth. The flashbacks appear to give us direct access to episodes in Lola's life. But even as we seem to be offered more authentic representations than those of the circus, in a number of ways what we meet is a series of refusals to offer a clear or coherent understanding of that life. The flashbacks are selective both in terms of the episodes shown and what is seen within these episodes. Such selectivity is of course conventional and inevitable but Ophüls makes of this inevitability a significant principle—our view is limited not simply because a film can only contain so much narrative, but because not everything can be known. The way the flashbacks are shaped does not claim unlimited access to Lola or the events of her life. We are, for example, not shown events that we would like—and might expect—to see, such as Lola's first meeting with King Ludwig.

In a parallel way, 'Lola Montes' as a character is unified by the body of Martine Carol but we are given not a psychological portrait so much as a series of partial views. Each episode offers us a perspective or perspectives on 'actual events'—insights of various kinds which are both suggestive of what might have driven Lola and at the same time deliberately fragmentary and inconclusive.<sup>10</sup> We see her acting the man's traditional part in sexual matters as she ends her affair with Liszt. She loses her father and is distressed by her mother's love affair on the ship; her mother attempts to marry her off but she elopes with her mother's lover; she escapes from an abusive marriage and becomes a performer. These sequences all hint at explanatory frameworks—her childhood; the desire to be loved; rebellion; the attempt to be free of control—all of which, once articulated, seem simultaneously plausible as material factors and hopelessly banal as explanations.

If there is a thread, it may be the desire for independence. It seems significant that the one major break with chronology comes in the first flashback, initiated by the question of whether Lola remembers her past, when, in a long dissolve from her face, she remembers the end of her affair with Liszt and the active control she was then able to exercise over her

life. But what the film sees clearly is that her assertions of independence had the effect of transforming her unwittingly, in a logic familiar in female centred melodrama, into a sexually scandalous figure. It is significant, too, that the question about the past triggers memory but does not initiate the circus display of her life. It is sex that drives the fascination of Lola as spectacle, as the ringmaster acknowledges in making the parade of lovers an early scene in his show. Yet the film reduces this almost entirely to a quantitative matter, like the enumeration of Don Giovanni's conquests in Mozart's opera. In another refusal on the film's part, sexual desire is constantly alluded to but is barely a presence in the scenes from Lola's life. As in *La Ronde*, sex is the relay that carries the narrative forward, but Lola is less its instigator than its occasion. It is telling that when she reaches what the circus presents as the pinnacle of her sexual career—her affair with King Ludwig—their relationship is shown as companionable but not erotic. Paradoxically, in terms of how she is seen by the public in Bavaria and in the circus representation of her life, Lola is most publicly scandalous when she is privately least the *femme fatale*.

This is one of many perspectives which Ophüls' construction of the flashbacks makes available to us, even as he refuses to offer a key to understanding her life. In ways that parallel what Wilson argues about *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, each episode develops perspectives on Lola's situation through a highly self-conscious visual narration, charting for us 'truths that [she] cannot at all discern', but Ophüls nevertheless withholds judgement and ultimate explanation. The vexed question of Martine Carol's performance is relevant here. Many writers have rightly regretted the extreme limitations of her portrayal of Lola, particularly in contrast to the wonderfully responsive and nuanced performances of, say, Joan Fontaine or Danielle Darrieux in other late Ophüls films. The limitations are striking and at times painful but Martine Carol's relative blankness is also a factor that pushes to the foreground of the film the refusal to develop Lola as a psychologically realised character in the mould, for instance, of Lisa in *Letter*. Ophüls makes eloquent thematic use of the performer imposed on him.

It's difficult, though, to come up with confident arguments about these matters. There is an almost vertiginous fascination in attempting to unpeel the layers of narration and the levels of story-telling authority, but some of the fascination comes from the sense of being held in a fictional equivalent of Chinese boxes or a hall of mirrors. In exposing processes of narration to such sustained scrutiny, the film pushes towards the very limits of the narrative conventions that it employs. Part of the force carried by the implicit parallel between the ringmaster and the director is to question the role of the male narrator and the very act of narrating. But then, what remains possible?

The circus creates a potent and emphatically critical metaphor for what happens to women in the process of representation. If Ophüls is recognising his kinship with the ringmaster, he is also recognising the inherent destructiveness of telling the woman's story. Yet that is also what his film is doing. One response to that dilemma is to find ways of distancing the film's view from that of the ringmaster and the cir-



cus. For instance, the refusal of the flashbacks to offer us the 'truth' about Lola is consistent with the revulsion we are encouraged to feel about her treatment in the circus. The film also creates views for us which are distinct from those of the circus audience, who remain distant, anonymous and visually obscured. The camera observes the show from inside the ring, not from the position of the audience. We see Lola's distress and are given access to information about her illness: we learn that participation in the circus, her status as spectacle, is killing her. But all these accretions of distance, together with the film's exposure and analysis of the mechanisms within which Lola is held, still leave the film representing her.

If *Le Plaisir* takes as one of its subjects the relationship between narrative, male voice, and the representation of women, *Lola Montes* attempts to push this further through its metaphor of the circus and its dramatised ringmaster/narrator. Susan White writes 'One can feel "Ophuls" being torn between the laying bare of cinema's ability to *show*, to exhibit, and the more occulted, fetishizing powers of the camera unmediated by a "director-figure"' (White, 300). I am less inclined to put the quotation marks around Ophuls and more inclined to give that extraordinary historical individual credit for the achievement that *Lola Montes* represents, but otherwise my sense of the tensions in the film parallels White's. The doubts about narrative and representation which the film embodies push it to the limits of 'classical' film-making. In the circumstances of the film's production, Ophuls could not explicitly 'lay bare' the mechanisms of cinema even if he had wanted to; but it is also unlikely that in those terms he would have wanted to. His work demonstrates his devotion to the possibilities of symbolic/realist film narrative, even as, in his last films, he pushes them to breaking point.

This may be at least part of the significance of the way the women's falls are treated. In carrying out her threat to attempt suicide, Josephine challenges the forces that have attempted to define and confine her, in the only way that seems available to her. As she runs up the stairs, Ophuls lets her escape the gaze which has defined her in the film's world, and in doing so tacitly acknowledges the complicity of his story-telling with the view of women in these worlds. In acting, the woman makes herself, for a moment, unrepresentable. As in 'Maison Tellier', but more dramatically, the film refuses to claim omniscience. It is like a tear in the fabric of the film—a sudden use of a different method, which acknowledges a brief but crucial shift in representation, away from looking at the woman to moving, and then looking, with her.

The context of Lola's jump is very different. It is the climax of the show and the moment of Lola's greatest humiliation as well as danger. She has literally to enact her 'fall'. But here Ophuls refuses to show what the circus public has come to see. Our views of the circus have been consistently separate from the circus spectators' but we have still looked at Lola. Here Ophuls goes further: instead of continuing to look at Lola, his camera asserts a kinship with her, a sudden sharing of her view, so that for a second she is no longer the object of the camera, defined by being looked at. The implication is surely that to show her would be to remain complicit with the ways of see-

ing that the circus markets. Refusing to show her is an act of discretion but more than that. It might be discrete to look away; Ophuls makes us look with Lola so that our view effectively becomes hers. Yet as in *Le Plaisir* the single, brief shot also embodies a refusal to imply that this kinship can be maintained and that the gap between character and camera can be closed. The situations of Lola and the women in *Le Plaisir* which the films analyse so rigorously, cannot be changed by falsely claiming access to their interior lives.

This is a central part of what is remarkable about Ophuls' handling of the falls. In adopting such oblique relationships to POV conventions he emphatically refuses to indulge the film spectator or himself by a more extended association with the subjectivity of the women. Equally, this refusal points to a deep understanding of the modes of fiction Ophuls was working with. The double narratives of both films embody profound doubts about his own role as director of films about such repressive worlds. The women's actions at these extreme moments intensely focus these doubts, the carefully qualified 'identification' implicitly acknowledging, in their contexts, the limits and flaws of his position as director, and yet recognising that as the director he is still held by his traditions. The brevity of these moments is not only to do with the split second it takes to fall; it also implicitly acknowledges that Ophuls cannot escape from the conventions of narrative and representation which his last films subject to such intense scrutiny.

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This article was first published, in a slightly different form and in translation, in 1895, *Revue de l'association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinema*, No. 34/35, Paris 2001.

#### NOTES

1 This phrase is borrowed from Robin Wood's article: 'Letter From an Unknown Woman: the Double Narrative', in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

2 See, for instance, in addition to Wood, George M. Wilson, *Narration in Light*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; Susan White, *The Cinema of Max Ophuls*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995; Deborah Thomas on *La Ronde* and Douglas Pye on *Le Plaisir* in *Movie* 29/30, 1982.

3 Wilson, Page 124.

4 White, Pages 5, 6.

5 Writing in *Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982, I mis-described this as a subjective shot.

6 Editorial Board discussion of *Lola Montes* in *Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982, Page 111.

7 *Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982.

8 This bears strongly on the key question of determinism in Ophuls' films—the levels at which it is legitimate to identify the chain of events, the lives of the characters, as 'determined' by forces outside their control. Characters' in the films often believe their lives to be governed in this way (Lisa's 'I know now that nothing happens by chance' is one example among many), although the film's presentation of events invites a more complex view of human agency in these matters. But in the late films determinism is a palpable fact of the narrative trajectory—these are pre-existing stories, the main structure of which is respected by the film adaptation, but which are transformed in the manner of their telling.

9 Ibid Page 111.

10 For parallel arguments within different analytical frameworks, see Masao Yamaguchi, 'For an Archaeology of *Lola Montes*' and Paul Willeman, 'The Ophuls Text: a Thesis', in *Ophuls*, edited by Paul Willeman, London: BFI, 1978. Yamaguchi suggests that '... any literal rendering of reality is mocked.' (Page 64); and Willeman that '... the woman is explicitly and directly put on show... But what the look finds is a mask, the woman as masquerade, as screen. The film's narrative and diegesis fragment under the pressure of penetrating beyond that mask... ' (Page 71).





# Werther

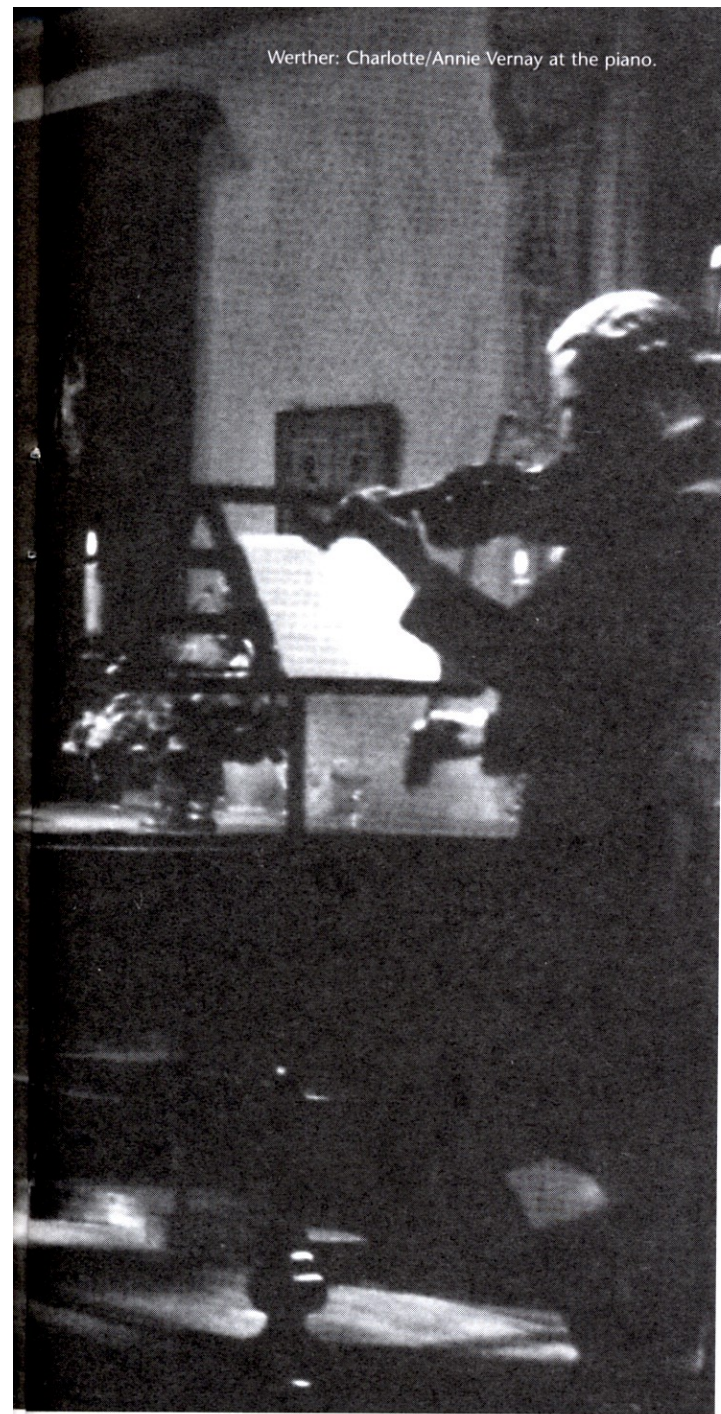
(Max Ophüls, 1938)

by Michael Walker

From Richardson, both Goethe and Rousseau learned the basic lesson that the subject of the novel is the "human heart", which is to say, the psyche in all its complexities and dark self-conceits, but especially at the moment of love. In them, the novel remains both psychological and erotic, dedicated not to the unwinding of an action replete with sharp reversals and recognitions, but with the exploration of a moral choice.  
—Leslie A Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel*<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago, writing on the generic tradition to which I felt that Ophüls's *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Caught* (1948) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949) belonged, I quoted the above passage<sup>2</sup>. I did not make the connection: the Goethe novel Fiedler was referring to was *Werther* and, whilst working in France ten years earlier than these Hollywood movies, Ophüls had adapted that very novel into a film. This article is an attempt to remedy the oversight, and to look at Ophüls's *Werther*—his one adaptation of a "classic" novel—in terms of both the tra-





dition Fiedler identified and the director's own concerns.

Like most of Ophuls's French films of the '30s, *Werther* does not have much of a reputation. Part of the problem, of course, is that it is an adaptation of a novel by a "great" writer; this was sufficient for Richard Roud, in his monograph on Ophuls, to write of the director as having "vulgarised his subject"<sup>3</sup>. In particular, Roud objects to a crucial change between novel and film. In the novel, Lotte—whom Werther knows to be engaged to Albert when he meets her—is the recipient of Werther's unsolicited passion, and she attempts to restrict him to the role of "friend". In the film, Charlotte/Annie Vernay keeps her engagement to Albert/Jean Galland a secret until Werther/Pierre Richard-Willm proposes, but in the meantime she has come to reciprocate the latter's love. Nevertheless, she

still goes through with her marriage to Albert, resulting in a situation which, in contrast to Roud, I find far more "tragic" than that depicted by Goethe. Unrequited love may of course be painful, but it is hardly as desolating as someone whom you love and who loves you marrying another.

Even among French admirers of Ophuls, I have been unable to find anything substantial on *Werther*. The most detailed piece on the film may well be in Susan White's book on Ophuls, but it is still relatively short, and mostly given over to a somewhat unreliable recounting of the plot, with a few observations about the use of sound in the film<sup>4</sup>. It is time that Ophuls's *Werther* was brought out from under the shadow of Goethe.

Goethe's *Werther*<sup>5</sup>, like Stefan Zweig's short story *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, is for the most part in the epistolary form, and in each case the letter(s) are written by only one person. An inevitable consequence of this is that we are restricted to the sensibility of one character, a restriction which apparently troubled Goethe towards the end of *Werther*, since he suddenly switches to extended third person passages. He thus belatedly tells us something of Lotte's own feelings about Werther, but the substance of the novel is nevertheless overwhelmingly devoted to Werther's emotional life. Setting aside the manner in which this is depicted—Werther rhapsodises; weeps; suffers; agonises—what concerns me here is the problems the structure of the source material poses for a film adaptation. In the case of *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the epistolary structure is retained in the film, and the judicious use of Lisa/Joan Fontaine's voice-over conveys the sense that her letter to Stefan/Louis Jourdan is being read by him even as we see it dramatised. In part because the letter is primarily concerned with the relationship between the two of them—so that Stefan is reading about himself, too—preserving the original structure works extremely well.

Goethe's use of the epistolary form is quite different from Zweig's. We know nothing of the friend to whom Werther writes, or even whether all the letters are in fact addressed to him; the form is really more like a diary. Nevertheless, Ophuls could have emulated Sacha Guitry's *Le Roman d'un Tricheur* (1936)—which has a first person voice-over—and retained the novel's first person narrative. Instead, he and his co-writers (script Hans Wilhelm; dialogue Fernand Crommelynck) took the more conventional—but, I would argue, more productive—course of rendering the film in the third person, recognising that by so doing they could adjust the balance between the protagonists: Ophuls's *Werther* is as much about Charlotte and her sufferings as Werther and his. In granting the woman's desires a voice, the film also sets up a challenge to the patriarchal structures of Goethe's world: Charlotte becomes a victim alongside Werther.

Zweig's short story is a mere 30 or so pages; Goethe's novel around 120<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, there are actually more events from Zweig's story in the 1948 film than from Goethe's novel in the earlier film. This is not to say that Goethe's *Werther* lacks incidents, but that Ophuls and his writers have reworked the source material to such an extent that few survive, and those that do are usually modified. For example, the film takes from



Goethe an episode in which Werther shows sympathy for a murderer, but significantly alters and expands it. In Goethe the man's victim is a romantic rival; in the film, the woman herself; in Goethe, Werther makes his plea for sympathy to the judge, Lotte's father, and Albert is only present in order to support the judge; in the film Werther's sympathy provokes a violent row between him and Albert, a row which dramatises crucial underlying tensions. In addition, it is evident that the film required a radically different tone from the novel in order to make it acceptable to a '30s audience. Highly emotional source material could be filmed relatively "straight" during much of the silent era—witness D.W.Griffith—but the arrival of sound changed all this: "melodramatic excess" was now much more likely to seem comical. There is little question, again, that the "toning down" of the melodrama in the film makes it more conventional than the novel but, equally, given the different eras in which each was produced, this was inevitable.

Goethe's Werther is of independent means, so that his ardent pursuit of Lotte is not complicated by anything so mundane as the requirements of a job. (He does work for a time, but in another town in an unsuccessful attempt to escape from his obsession.) By contrast, the film begins with Werther travelling to Wahlheim to take up his new appointment as an auditor (référéndaire) in the justice department, where Albert works as a lawyer. The change is typical of Ophuls: as the circus director/Friedrich Dömin in *Lola Montès* (1955) says of Lola: "she must earn her living". Ophuls's characters do indeed usually work for a living, and the love affairs which they enter into are frequently in tension with duties and demands imposed on them from elsewhere. In fact, although Ophuls's Werther is a poet and a dreamer, he attends to his duties quite competently throughout the first half of the film—up to Albert and Charlotte's wedding. It is only after that that his emotional turmoil mirrors that of Goethe's Werther, and leads to behaviour which prompts reprimands from Albert and from their employer, the President/Jean Périer.

As he travels on the coach to Wahlheim, Werther makes friends with Gustave/Jean Buquet, a boy of about eleven who is in fact Charlotte's brother. (Charlotte's father is a widower, and she is expected to look after the six younger children.) Impulsively, Werther gives the boy his hat, which will lead to his meeting Charlotte: Gustave becomes very attached to the hat, and is anxious, later, to introduce his sister to Werther so that the latter can explain that the gift was genuine. But the hat is even more important to the dynamic of the film for what it carries. Because it was too big for Gustave, Werther placed a folded sheet of paper in its lining to make it fit. When Gustave finds the paper, he reads the poem inscribed on it to the other children as they are going to bed; Charlotte overhears, takes the paper, and reads the poem out to herself. This takes place on a darkened landing, with Charlotte enclosed in an oasis of light, and Ophuls's camera tracks in slowly to register the romantically-privileged moment. (All the interiors were filmed by Eugen Schüfftan, and the low key lighting of the night-time scenes is consistently superb.) Charlotte has not yet met Werther, but she reads one of his poems and—as we later discover—she is sufficiently moved by it to memorise it.

The poem will continue to connect the characters; it is, indeed, one of Ophuls's circulating objects, such as Lisa's white roses, or Louise/Danielle Darrieux's ear-rings in *Madame de...* (1953), objects which become more and more charged with meaning as they keep recurring in the narrative. But the poem is linked to another Ophulsian motif in the film: the notion of destiny. When Werther and Charlotte are brought together by Gustave, they are on an open air dance stand at a fête. Albert is away, studying for his examinations to be a judge, but he had promised Charlotte that he would return for the fête, so that they could dance together. It is an early indication of Albert's priorities that he does not return, and it is Werther with whom Charlotte dances. From the moment that hero and heroine meet, the archetypal nature of the triangle is established: Albert, the husband-figure, attends to his duties at the expense of his relationship with the heroine; Werther, the lover-figure, moves effortlessly into the romantic space thereby created. As soon as Werther confirms that he gave Gustave the hat, Charlotte's face shows her interest in him: not only has he been kind to her brother, but he must be the author of the poem. When Werther invites her to dance, she doesn't hesitate, despite the strenuous objections of her aunt/Paulette Pax, shrieking her name in an attempt to stop this impropriety. During the dance, Werther tells Charlotte that he already knows her and that their meeting was predestined. Charlotte insists that she doesn't believe it, but we can see from her expression that she is perturbed; that Werther has introduced a romantic possibility hitherto unimagined in her circumscribed life. Later that afternoon, they are paired together in a game of forfeits, prompting Charlotte to comment on the "extraordinary coincidence", whereupon Werther points out that on this occasion "destiny had nothing to do with it": he arranged it.

Critics have noted that Ophuls's characters have a tendency to invoke destiny<sup>7</sup>. But it is important to consider the contexts. For example, when Lisa's voice-over introduces her crucial re-meeting with Stefan at the opera with the words "I know now, nothing happens by chance", we are aware of the subjective nature of the assertion: it is in Lisa's construction of Stefan as her "great love" that the sense of destiny lies. By contrast, when Donati/Vittorio de Sica and Louise keep meeting by chance in *Madame de...*, and they see this as the workings of "le destin", this precipitates them into a love affair which the narrative may collaborate with them in implying is "destined" but which is catastrophic in its consequences. *Werther* is different again. Werther's initial invocation of destiny when he meets Charlotte may be no more than the approach of a man who seeks to charm, but he soon turns more serious: he admits his manipulation of the forfeits and does not take advantage of it. Charlotte, by contrast, continues to "play the game", leading to a charming little scene which reveals the delicate undercurrents between the two characters. The couple has been sent out of the room for the count of ten. During this, complying with what she feels is expected, Charlotte tilts her face upwards and closes her eyes. Annie Vernay handles the moment beautifully: her body sways with the instability of her pose and her tense anticipation of the kiss, intimating Charlotte's conflict of



desire. But Werther does not kiss her. As the counting reaches ten, Charlotte opens her eyes and declares that it's too late. Werther says that, even if they had counted to twenty, he would not have kissed her: "It's too soon". In the next scene, they go out into the country together: despite Charlotte's secret engagement, their courtship has begun. It is at this point that the film reintroduces the poem, and in so doing makes both Werther and Charlotte wonder again about destiny.

Although the trip to the country is officially under the chaperonage of Charlotte's aunt, she falls asleep, enabling the couple to go for a walk. During this, Werther tells Charlotte that, long before he met her, he wrote a poem for her; he begins to recite it, whereupon she immediately completes the second line<sup>8</sup>. Werther is amazed, declaring that it's incredible. Charlotte responds by saying: "It's not as incredible as to recognise someone without having met them before. And when a meeting is destined, even hats get involved". On the one hand, this explains away the mystery of how she knows the poem; on the other, it returns to the notion of destiny: even though Charlotte's words are partly playful, it's as if Werther had unwittingly sent her the poem. Werther now feels able to substantiate his claim that he wrote the poem for her years ago and recognised Charlotte when he first met her: "You see, I didn't lie to you; I saw your face in my dreams".

The references to the poem at this stage are positive: it epitomises Werther's artistic aspirations; it has served to connect hero and heroine. But, after Charlotte has married, the poem assumes a very different meaning. After a particularly painful

evening of chamber music—Charlotte on piano; Werther on violin; Albert on cello; the President singing—Charlotte takes the opportunity to return the poem to Werther in a book. Now Werther dismisses the poem as childish, but Charlotte says that she's re-read it often and still finds it beautiful. Nevertheless, she insists on returning it. When we next see Werther, he is in a brothel—an indication of his state of dissipation—and a prostitute goes through his pockets and finds the poem. She takes it to the bar-room and reads it out to the prostitutes and their clientele, a brutal echo of Gustave reading the poem to the children: the prostitutes mock the poem's romanticism, and Werther, overhearing, rushes out to stop them, seizes the poem and flees. It is the utter humiliation of this which prompts him to write a desperate letter to Charlotte, asking her to help him decide what to do. When she fails to reply, he goes out and shoots himself.

Sullied by the prostitutes' mockery, it's as if the poem is transformed into the letter. Charlotte even holds it with the same sort of tenderness as she did the poem, but when she then goes out, it is not to visit Werther, but to go to confession. There, she comes close to admitting her adulterous feelings for Werther as she mentions her problem in loving her husband, and refers to the ways in which she is always feeling "the other's" eyes on her and his voice speaking to her. She then speaks of the "lettre terrible" she received from Werther and asks the priest what to do to save herself: "should I destroy the letter, or will my silence be a lie?" The priest, of course, tells her to return to her husband and keep nothing from him.

*Madame De...* (1953) Vittorio De Sica and Danielle Darrieux.







*Letter From an Unknown Woman*

The priest is the final figure in a “patriarchal chain” of authority figures in Charlotte’s life. Her father is the first: as well as expecting her to take care of her younger brothers and sisters, he regulates her sexuality, forbidding her to go out into the garden at night with Albert since their engagement is not yet official. In the approved manner of patriarchy, Albert takes over from the father when he returns to Wahlheim as a judge and marries Charlotte. Although we don’t see the wedding, we do see the couple preparing for the wedding night, and Charlotte’s drunkenness here may be taken as a sign of her unhappiness at her situation. She is sufficiently drunk for Albert to comment on it, and when she admits to being “a little giddy”, he responds with “Are you not afraid of starting life as a serious woman with a little lie?” It’s a very curious line, not least in its indication of what Albert considers it means to Charlotte to be married to him, but I can only assume that he is referring to her previous comment and suggesting that she’s more than just a little giddy. In other words, he’s disturbed by her condition, and the scene ends with him leaning over her, laying down the rules of the marriage: no lies; no secrets. (Hence Charlotte’s concern, repeated several times during her confession, over what constitutes a lie.) He strives to do this gently, but he is, nevertheless, asserting control and it is on this image that Ophüls discreetly blacks out for the honeymoon.

Even Gustave almost joins this procession of controlling male figures. The first time we see Charlotte after her honeymoon she is visiting her old home. The scene indicates—on this occasion, quite unambiguously—Charlotte’s misery: Gustave says that he saw her crying, and Charlotte has to beg him on her knees not to run to their father with this information. The one male authority figure who is largely ineffectual is the President: when Charlotte cries again during the evening of chamber music, he assumes that she has been moved by the music. Nevertheless, his very naivety leads him to pass on to Albert information which makes the latter realise—as he notices that Charlotte has paused to listen to their conversation—that it is on Charlotte’s account that Werther is behaving in such an “irresponsible” manner. It is at this point that Albert becomes the affronted husband: in a manner which directly anticipates the General/Charles Boyer in *Madame de...* sweeping round the room and shutting the windows to imprison Louise, he brusquely takes up a candle in order to go upstairs and confront Charlotte. We only see the first part of the ensuing scene: he tells her that Werther will have to be transferred, and forbids her to see him. After Charlotte has tried to lock herself in her room, but relented when Albert insists on knowing “everything”, Ophüls cuts to the brothel. How much Charlotte divulged to Albert of her own feelings, we do not know.



Nevertheless, the pattern in Charlotte's life is clear: she had promised herself when young to an older man her father approved of, and she feels unable to go against this when she falls in love with someone else. Her youthfulness is very significant here: Annie Vernay was only sixteen when she made *Werther*<sup>9</sup>; Jean Galland was over fifty. (Even Pierre Richard-Willm was in his early forties, but he had a youthful star persona.) In effect, like so many women throughout history, Charlotte represses her own desires in order not to disturb the patriarchal order. It is Werther's sense that this is indeed the case that precipitates his own virtual breakdown.

During her confession, Charlotte tells the priest that she should have told "him" (she doesn't mention Werther by name) that she was taken, but the words did not come. She is referring to the period when Werther courted her, and it is not difficult to see why she should have kept quiet: she was sharing thoughts and feelings with Werther—about poetry; about music—which were simply not part of her relationship with Albert. Her scenes with Werther are almost all associated with nature and the outdoors: the open air dance; their meetings and walks in the country. Indeed, these scenes in the first half of the film give *Werther* a pastoral feel—like the trip to the country in the Maison Tellier episode of *Le Plaisir* (1952). (The pastoral aspect of the film is focused on by Eugene Lourié, the film's art director, in his book *My Work in Films*. He devotes a chapter to *Werther*<sup>10</sup>, which he says is one of his favourite films.) By contrast, we never see Charlotte and Albert together out of doors, not even in the town.

Charlotte and Werther's meetings in the country—they rendezvous each Sunday, although how Charlotte keeps this from her father is not shown—culminate with his proposal. Filmed entirely in close-ups—of Werther, of Charlotte and of their right hands, clasped together—this is one of Ophüls's most moving scenes, as Werther rehearses the words that he intends to say to her father about his few worldly possessions, his love for Charlotte and his wish for her hand in marriage. Only at the end does Charlotte withdraw her hand from Werther's and tell him what she has been suppressing throughout their meetings: that she's engaged to Albert. As she flees in tears, Ophüls cuts to the town, where the mechanism of the carillon in the tower is being altered. The irony is that it was Charlotte who gave Werther the idea of changing the carillon's tune to that of a folk song by Bredel, a local composer, that it was Werther who took this up and ensured that it happened, and that he has just imagined them returning and listening to the tune ("for the first time") as a mark of their engagement. And so, when Charlotte hears the carillon play the tune as she arrives back in town, it is a brutal reminder of what she has just renounced. Ophüls superimposes the carillon bells over shots of her running through the streets; she covers her ears in a vain attempt to blot it out, then she faints.

But does Charlotte's undoubted distress also derive from her own deceptions; are we indeed in the Fiedler territory of the "dark self-conceits" of the heroine? Unless she was hoping that she would find the strength to break her engagement to Albert, it was surely cruel to let Werther remain in ignorance for so long, to let him reach the point of proposing. But it is

very flattering for a young woman to be courted so assiduously by a romantic figure such as Werther, especially since her fiancé is relatively unromantic. As it is, Charlotte makes things worse for both herself and Werther: for herself, because she falls in love with him and then goes through with her marriage to Albert; for Werther, because she allowed him to hope for so long, and then clearly reveals, on the occasions when they subsequently meet, how unhappy she is.

Charlotte's confession is filmed in one long (ninety second) take, the camera tracking slowly past the confessional to reveal her as she is speaking. We do not see the priest: he is simply the voice of the ideology, instructing the heroine what to do. As he does this, Ophüls tilts from Charlotte to include a crucifix in the background of the shot; he then dissolves to the "Marienhof murderer" in his cell as Werther visits him, a dissolve which precisely replaces the image of Christ on the cross with the body of the murderer. It is an astonishing link: is the murderer in some sense being likened to Christ? The Christian religion has sometimes functioned in an ambiguous manner in Ophüls's work—at the end of *Werther*, Charlotte will pray in vain for Werther, just as, at the end of *Madame de...*, Louise prays in vain for Donati—but this is positively subversive. The murderer has no regrets for his crime, declaring vehemently that now he can have peace: "she will be mine". He is hardly the sort of sacrificial figure traditionally associated with Christ.

The long take of Charlotte's confession, culminating with the dissolve "through the crucifix", has a fascinating echo in the long take which terminates the flashback in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*. The shot which accompanies Lisa's voice-over announcing her son's death of typhus is of a crucifix with three candles spaced around it: one in front; one at each edge of the frame. Ophüls then dissolves to an overall shot of a hospital room, a dissolve which positions the crucifix so that it seems, briefly, to hover over an empty bed. The crucifix and candles can now be seen to frame the bed: the former on the wall at its head; a candle at each corner. The Christian iconography clearly tells us that this is the bed on which Lisa's son died. (So clearly that Susan White actually hallucinates the child's body on the bed<sup>11</sup>.) On the right hand side of the shot is the edge of a hospital screen. The camera pans right to bring the screen more prominently into frame; pauses, then cranes down to include Lisa, in front of the screen, but partly masked by a lamp, writing the final words of her letter. Throughout this fifty second take, again the heroine is speaking, telling Stefan not just of their son's death, but of her own fever and ending with her final declaration of love. Again, we have the dissolve "through the crucifix"—on this occasion, beginning the shot—and the heroine's "confession", but the most remarkable connection is the way that the screen positionally and visually matches *Werther's* confessional. And, as Ophüls pans to emphasise it, Lisa's voice-over says "Perhaps God has been kind, and I too have caught the fever". In other words, Ophüls links this echo of the confessional with the heroine's wish that the deity in his benevolence will grant her own death.

The issue of Ophüls and the Christian religion is, I suspect, a difficult and delicate one, and all I seek to do here is flag up





*Le Plaisir.* Jean Gabin and Danielle Darrieux.

these somewhat problematic moments. It is true that, in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the brief sense of the crucifix hovering over the bed suggests a watchful presence, but the logic of Lisa's belief that nothing happens by chance is that her son's death was also "destined": was God responsible? A consideration of the wider issue of the place of Christianity in Ophüls's work might profitably begin with Douglas Pye's excellent analysis of the church sequence in *Le Plaisir*<sup>12</sup>; I suspect that there is much to be said.

Werther sees no need for the murderer to be kept in chains and orders their removal. When Albert arrives, this is the first point of contention between them. They then go into the courtroom, where they have a heated argument, a row fuelled on Albert's part by his belief that Charlotte had been to visit Werther. In effect, Albert is accusing Werther of sympathising too much with the murderer, and he insists that "society can only establish itself on the basis of moral tradition". Werther questions whether Albert has ever known the suffering which led the man to kill, and declares that, if he had to take off his feelings before going to work, he'd resign. Albert is quick to interpret this as an actual offer of resignation, and declares that he accepts it.

Early in the film, there is a scene in which Werther and Albert discover that they share an enthusiasm for Rousseau's *Social Contract*, banned in the Grand Duchy, even to the extent of each having underlined the same passage: "To renounce freedom is to renounce one's humanity, one's rights as a man and equally one's duties". The passage is in a section, headed "Slavery", in which Rousseau likens the subjects under a ruler who is not accountable—a king; a despot—to slaves. But Rousseau uses the chains of the slave as the opening metaphor

in his book: the famous words "Man was born free and is everywhere in chains". Accordingly, behind the climactic row between Albert and Werther lies Rousseau's symbol: Albert's insistence that the chains remain on the murderer indicates his abandonment of Rousseau's humanity.

It is significant that this is the only time in the film that we go into the courtroom. It is as if Werther were the accused and Albert the prosecutor, indicting Werther for his liberalism. Freed from the constraints of having to sit behind the judge's desk, Albert uses the courtroom arena theatrically, striding around and pointing his finger at Werther. Viewed thus, the scene is a continuation of an earlier scene in which he reprimanded Werther for his wayward behaviour: on that occasion he was in his office, and was less severe, but the fact that he was dressing in his judge's robes as he lectured Werther indicated his assumption of the mantle of the law. Albert is a judge, and his judgement of Werther is with the authority of the law.

In Charlotte's case, it is the Church which is used to recuperate her into marriage; in Werther's, the law which is used to expel him. In both cases, their feelings are viewed as transgressive, threatening the harmony of bourgeois society. And yet, the more extreme reaction of the military/aristocratic husbands in *Liebelei* (1932), *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and *Madame de...*, who insist that their honour can only be restored by killing someone, is here avoided. Partly because of the pastoral feel of the first half of the film, partly because Ophüls seemingly felt disinclined to present too negative a view of 18th Century small-town Germany, in *Werther* the strictures of bourgeois society are more muted than in most of the director's films. In particular, the film lacks repressive authority-figures: the President is a well-meaning, unthreatening fig-



ure; even the Grand Duke's one appearance is essentially benevolent: he approves the changing of the carillon tune. In his argument with Werther, Albert is certainly goaded into expressing some strong feelings, but to label his behaviour here as "fascist", as Barry Salt does<sup>13</sup>, seems to me somewhat excessive. One could indeed argue that, in assuming that it was love—rather than jealousy or possessiveness—which drove the man to kill, it is Werther who is sentimentalising the murderer, and Albert who is resisting this.

The poem is not the only "romantic icon" which serves to connect Werther and Charlotte. On the day they first go into the country, Werther buys a silhouette of Charlotte and her aunt, and handles the former with the same lover's devotion as Charlotte handles the poem. When he runs through his proposal speech, for example, he mentions the silhouette as one of his few "worldly possessions", and he makes a point of taking it with him when he goes to commit suicide. But just as the poem is contaminated by the gaze of another, so the image of Charlotte as silhouette is similarly transformed by another's gaze. When Charlotte listens to the conversation between Albert and the President, she is on an upstairs landing behind a glass screen: all Albert downstairs can see is her silhouette. But he can see that she has stopped to listen, which prompts his affronted husband act and leads to his hostility towards Werther in the courtroom. Again, Ophüls has taken a motif which might in other contexts be no more than a sentimental device to connect hero and heroine and converted it into something much more telling. It's as if the image of Charlotte as silhouette "returns" in the marital home, but in a manner which reveals the forbidden passions attached to it.

Overall, the movement of *Werther* is from light into darkness, from a predominance of daytime scenes, many of them outdoors, to interiors set at night and, for the last evening, in the rain. Ophüls's use of the motif of up/down—which occurs across his work, culminating in a complex elaboration of the motif in *Lola Montès*—also modulates during the course of the film. In the early scenes, the traditional associations predominate: ascending is hopeful, optimistic; descending the reverse. Thus, it is when Charlotte says farewell to Albert and goes upstairs to the children that she first encounters Werther's poem. The movement is echoed in her going up on to the dance stand to meet Werther, with her aunt's shrieks emanating from below. The meeting-place in the country is at the top of a hill. But, from the moment when Charlotte arrives back in town and looks up at the tower as the carillon plays "their tune", the up/down associations become more complicated. The tune seems to bear down on Charlotte, tormenting her. Its location, in a tower which overlooks the town, is like a symbol for the life of emotional oppression which now awaits her. But the positioning and effect of the tune also makes it seem like a collective Superego, punishing the heroine for her transgressive thoughts and feelings.

The negative associations—of ascending; of the Bredel tune—extend into the marital home, beginning with the honeymoon when we first see Charlotte sitting at the bottom of the stairs, drunk. When she ascends on this occasion—to her honeymoon bed—she is unsteady, as if under duress. The first

scene in the house after the honeymoon is the evening of chamber music, but even the recital itself is briefly overlaid by the sound of the carillon, prompting a charged exchange of looks between Werther and Charlotte. The evening includes their final farewell—which does occur downstairs—but the fact that the moment when Charlotte's silhouette gives her away to Albert she is upstairs emphasises that the whole house is now darkened by the misery of her situation. It is the same with the (upstairs) music room, which Charlotte seems to cling to as the room in the house which she most associates with Werther. But as she looks out of its rain-streaked window on the last evening—echoing a shot of Werther looking out of his window, waiting in vain for her to come—once again the carillon plays the Bredel tune, and she becomes hysterical, covering her ears, crying out and collapsing on the floor.

It is when Albert has returned home after his row with Werther in the courtroom that the up/down motif comes most vigorously into play. Werther's servant comes to ask Albert for the two pistols which Werther had lent him early in the film, and Albert begins to search for them. The search centres on the attic, where they had been placed and forgotten in a box in a trunk, but it requires three trips there to retrieve them. First, Albert cannot find them, then Charlotte goes up, finds them, but promptly shuts box and trunk and shouts down to Albert that she's failed, then Albert himself goes up and brings them down, accusing Charlotte of not looking properly. During all this, the steep stairs up to the attic are given a strong visual emphasis; indeed, when Charlotte goes up them, Ophüls's camera cranes with her, so that there are overtones, however fleeting, of ascending the scaffold. Then, after Albert has handed over the pistols, he goes back upstairs and hears Charlotte praying: as she does this, she is actually on the attic stairs. Dramatically, Ophüls wipes back and forth between husband and wife: Albert looking fixedly at Charlotte; Charlotte herself wrapped up in the intensity of saying the Lord's prayer to the exclusion of all else. The film then dissolves from Charlotte to Werther riding up the hill to their old rendezvous under the tree; he dismounts, says farewell to his horse, and walks off. His suicide is registered purely by the sound of a shot, and the horse, reacting to this, running away.

The pistols shut away in the attic are instruments of death, and the ascents and descents of Charlotte and Albert constitute a conflict between them over their release in that capacity. Their location at the top of the house echoes the carillon at the top of the tower: just as the "repressed" returns in the form of the carillon tune, so Charlotte tries, and fails, to keep the pistols "repressed" in the trunk. Werther claims to want the pistols because he is leaving Wahlheim, but it is clear that Charlotte knows what he intends to do and it is highly likely that Albert also suspects. As Susan White notes, there are overtones, here, of the duel with which so many Ophüls's films end<sup>14</sup>, overtones which are emphasised in the close-up of the pistols—which look exactly like duelling pistols—as Albert hands them over to Werther's servant. Likewise, Charlotte's helplessness in preventing Werther's death echoes the helplessness of Theo/Willy Eichberger in *Liebelei* as well as Louise in *Madame de...* in preventing the final, fatal duels.



In his chapter on *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, Robin Wood lists twenty-two stylistic features and recurring motifs in Ophüls's films<sup>15</sup>. It is a measure of the consistency of the director's work that, if one runs through the list with *Werther* in mind, with just a few exceptions—no Vienna, 1900; only one, brief, appearance by a soldier; no flashbacks—the elements are all there. In addition, the film contains two familiar Ophüls motifs which Robin Wood does not mention: the stress on the work of servants and the use of interruptions, both of which belong to the insistent presence of the “everyday” in his films. On the other hand, the extremely elaborate tracking shots of the later films—the shots which, in Andrew Britton's phrase, “accompany and observe” the characters<sup>16</sup>—are not much in evidence at this stage in Ophüls's career. For example, the dance in *Werther* is very fragmented in its shots compared with the ball-room sequence in *Madame de...*, which is all flowing camera movements.

In his memoirs, Goethe has described the manner in which he conceived and wrote *Werther*:

(I) let my inner self rule me at will and permit(ted) all outside events to penetrate in a way characteristic of them... I tried to release myself from all alien emotions, to look kindly upon what was going on around me and let all living things, beginning with man himself, affect me as deeply as possible, each in its own way. The result was a marvelous affinity with nature and a warm and heartfelt response—a harmony with all things—that made me capable of being deeply touched by every change, whether of place or region, of day or season, or by anything else<sup>17</sup>.

It will be immediately apparent to any student of Ophüls that his work is simply not like this. Although he is sympathetic to the feelings of his protagonists, these are always placed in a context, so that we can see the determining factors, such as Lisa's schoolgirl youthfulness when she first falls in love with Stefan. In addition, he will frequently explore what sustains the passions of the characters, so that the deeper fantasies emerge. For example, I have argued that “a Stefan that Lisa can fantasise about, as in her last words ‘If only you had taken what was always yours...’ is a great deal more ‘hers’ than a Stefan with whom she has entered into an open, honest, mutually demanding relationship, however loving”<sup>18</sup>.

Modern literary critics have made a similar case for Goethe's *Werther*, arguing that the very excess of the hero's behaviour generates its own internal critique of him<sup>19</sup>. But this was not how the novel was generally perceived at the time of publication. It was a huge popular success; young men imitated Werther's dress; some even identified their own romantic disappointments with Werther's to the extent of shooting themselves<sup>20</sup>. In Ophüls, there is more of an *obvious* balance between sympathy for and critique of the hero. For example, Werther's response to Albert and Charlotte's wedding is to go to an inn to get drunk, but when he histrionically raises his arm to smash his wrist on a wine glass, the innkeeper stops him: “It's easy to see that you don't have to clean the floor”. The comment serves to ironise Werther's behaviour: we are

invited to see it as self-advertisingly melodramatic. In the brothel scene, the contrast between the suffering hero and the cynical onlookers may seem more weighted towards sympathy for Werther, but there is still a sense that Werther is a victim of his own self-indulgence. In his final letter to Charlotte, he characterises his visit to the brothel as an attempt to make himself “forever unworthy” of her; in itself, a masochistic act. It's as if the prostitutes' mockery, shattering his seeking of oblivion in degradation, then brings him to his senses; when he shouts “Assez!” at them, he is also in effect referring to himself. But this means that there is then more of a problem with his suicide. In the novel, Werther is clearly deranged by the time he shoots himself, and Goethe—very powerfully—has him botch it: he blows his brains out, but then doesn't die for several hours. In the film, the suicide not only lacks Goethe's sense of inevitability, but also goes against Werther's assertion, in his letter to Charlotte, that he wants to live. It thus seems more like an example of the “romantic pessimism” that Ophüls's films have sometimes been criticised for<sup>21</sup>.

This would be my only significant reservation about the film, and it is more than balanced by Ophüls's characterisation of Charlotte, which seems to me a massive improvement on that of Goethe's Lotte. I would in fact argue that Charlotte is very similar to Lisa; that, however miserable she seems at times, she is in effect living out a masochistic fantasy of Werther as her “great love”, a fantasy which is dependent on her sharing—in some sense—Werther's suffering. Such a reading is implied quite strongly by the undertones of their final evening together. After the chamber recital, the President takes Albert into an adjacent room, where they discuss what to do about Werther's behaviour. Alone with Werther, Charlotte says that she's heard that he goes drinking every night, and asks him not to. Werther replies by alluding to his reasons: “It's very difficult to forget what is and what will always be”. His words are ambiguous, since they could be a reference to Charlotte's marriage. But Charlotte interprets them as referring to their (impossible) love: she echoes the last phrase “what will always be” with an intonation which clearly suggests a depth of feeling, and then quickly adds “but which nevertheless cannot be”. Werther then rapidly packs up his violin, telling her that he was forced to come to the recital that evening, but he won't be coming again, whereupon Charlotte becomes quite distressed, and starts to plead with him. They are interrupted by Albert and the President's return.

The scene takes place with the couple standing by the piano, and Ophüls films this whole exchange in one (sixty second) take in a formally balanced two-shot, with two pairs of candles on the piano in the foreground matching the positions of the hero and heroine behind them. The candles have been moved from their earlier positions in order to compose the shot, and one effect of its symmetry is to highlight the suppressed passions of the couple. Werther's sudden closing and picking up of his violin case can be understood as an attempt to bring this distinctly painful conversation to a close, but Charlotte is so perturbed by the thought of not seeing him again that she reaches out to restrain him; externalising her wish to hold on to him. As Albert and the President then re-



enter the room in the background space between the couple, driving them apart, Ophuls immediately begins to film from different angles, with different groupings, so that the editing communicates a sense of dislocation. The way their entrance interrupts an intimate scene is very typical of Ophuls, echoing, for example, the early scene when Albert and Werther's discussion of *The Social Contract* is interrupted by the entry of a clerk, obliging them to change the subject. In that scene, too, Ophuls moves from an extended balanced two-shot—as the two men share their enthusiasm for Rousseau's ideas—to a series of shots from different angles as the intruding clerk moves around the room.

The exchange between Werther and Charlotte suggests strongly that she is very anxious to continue seeing him. It's as if, by witnessing his suffering, she is confirmed in her conviction of their mutual love. But when they meet again downstairs, she seems prepared to let him go, as if she now accepts that it is simply too painful for him to continue seeing her. In another long take, filmed from an unusually low angle so that their gestures are emphasised, she takes his hand as he bids her "Adieu", then returns his poem inside a book Albert wants to lend him. Her language is now subtly different: when Werther says that the poem belongs to her, she says that it must not belong to her, and asks him to try to understand. She is now speaking as a wife, and Werther's echoing of "understand" indicates his bitterness; as if he's done anything but "understand". He moves to the door, the camera panning with him, and Charlotte meekly follows. Only as Werther is about to leave does Ophuls cut to a two-shot of the couple at the door, a cut motivated by Charlotte once more reaching to touch Werther, telling him that he should wear a coat: "autumn has begun". Werther's reply, as he puts on his coat, is perhaps the most moving line in the film: "Autumn has begun, but there hasn't been a summer". He walks away, and we see Charlotte mouth "Werther" to herself as she watches him. They won't meet again.

Charlotte's behaviour at this point may be understood in the relatively familiar terms of the sacrifice of the woman's film heroine: she will give up the man she loves for the sake of her marriage. But, even as the film stresses the self-repression involved in this, it hints at the subversive possibility that Charlotte seeks to preserve in fantasy the conviction that Werther is her great love. Her confession may be seen as an attempt to negotiate her feelings of guilt over this, and if obeying the priest—which extends to giving Albert Werther's letter—does perhaps relieve her conscience, the realisation that Werther is intending to commit suicide clearly devastates her. It is, surely, the sheer passion of her praying that transfixes Albert, and it seems highly likely that he has simply never seen her like this. Ophuls's dramatic wipes between the two of them may thus be seen as like slashes, psychically severing husband and wife.

Interviewed by Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut, Ophuls has commented on his '30s films after fleeing from Germany: "It was very difficult to find subjects which were... let's say, poetic. I think I had an opportunity in France, with *Werther*, but I made a mess of it"<sup>22</sup>. This article has been an

attempt to argue that Ophuls seriously underestimated his achievement on *Werther*, which seems to me a very considerable film. I would go further. The Fiedler quotation at the beginning was written, as noted, with Goethe's *Werther* in mind. But I would argue that it has more relevance to Ophuls's *Werther*, where we are consistently encouraged to look at what lies behind the protagonists' actions; to explore the "dark self-conceits" which secretly motivate them.

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Many thanks to Sonya Suttle for invaluable assistance with translation of the film's dialogue.

#### NOTES

- 1 Leslie A Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), 101.
- 2 Michael Walker: "Ophuls in Hollywood" (*Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982), 43/44.
- 3 Richard Roud: *Max Ophuls: an index* (London: British Film Institute, 1958), 22.
- 4 Susan M. White: *The Cinema of Max Ophuls; Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 219-222.
- 5 The German title is *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*, first published in 1774, although revised by Goethe in 1787. The first English translation (1779) was entitled *The Sorrows of Young Werther* which, as one translator, Baynard Quincy Morgan, acidly points out, is a mistranslation of the German which has been perpetuated for two hundred years. His translation is *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (London: John Calder, 1956). I shall follow Fiedler's side-stepping of the problem and refer to the novel as *Werther*. Unfortunately, there is also a confusion over the title of the film, which is often listed—especially in French reference works—as *Le Roman de Werther*. In the prints I have seen, the title has always been *Werther* or, to be exact, *Werther d'après Goethe*.
- 6 Very approximately: I've averaged out the lengths of the various translations I've encountered. Zweig's short story is reprinted in Virginia Wright Wexman and Karen Hollinger (eds): *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Rutgers University Press, 1986).
- 7 Robin Wood's chapter on *Letter From an Unknown Woman* in *Personal Views* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976) includes a paragraph on "Chance, Fate, Predestination" (121); Jean-Loup Bourget's "Le tombeau de Max Ophuls" in *Positif* 232/233 (July/August 1980), includes a subheading "Le destin" (27).
- 8 We only really hear these first two lines of the poem, but they give an idea of Werther's rather flowery style: "Je suis l'oiseau chanteur/ Je voltige vers elle sous le feuillage déjà noir" ("I am a singing bird/ I flutter towards her under the already dark foliage").
- 9 For someone so young, her performance is astonishingly mature. Tragically, Annie Vernay died only three years later, of typhus, whilst travelling by ship to the USA.
- 10 Eugene Lourie: *My Work in Films* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 31-42.
- 11 White, 188.
- 12 Douglas Pye: *Le Plaisir* (*Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982), 86.
- 13 Barry Salt: *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1983), 364.
- 14 White, 221.
- 15 Wood, 117-122.
- 16 Andrew Britton: "Metaphor and Mimesis: *Madame de...*" (*Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982), 99.
- 17 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *My Life: Poetry and Truth*, Books XII and XIII (1814), reprinted in Goethe: *The Sorrows of Young Werther and Selected Writings*, translated by Catherine Hutter (New York: New American Library, 1962), 131.
- 18 Walker, 46.
- 19 See, for example, Martin Swales: "Die Leiden des jungen Werther" in Lesley Sharpe (Ed): *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132-136.
- 20 Most books on Goethe mention this. See P.Hume Brown: *The Youth of Goethe* (London: John Murray, 1913), 196-199; Nicholas Saul: "Goethe the writer and literary history" in Sharpe (Ed), 29.
- 21 This is one of the points debated in the "Lola Montès discussion" in *Movie* 29/30, Summer 1982, 128-121.
- 22 Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut: "Interview with Max Ophuls" (*Cahiers du Cinéma* 72, June 1957). Translated in Paul Willemsen (Ed): *Ophuls* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 18.



# Yoshiwara

## MAX OPHULS IN THE EMPIRE OF PASSION

by Alexander Jacoby

The period of exile between Max Ophuls' departure from Germany after the rise of Hitler and his flight to America after the fall of France remains the most neglected portion of his career. Of the nine films he directed, mainly in France, during those seven years, only one (*La Signora di Tutti* [1934]) is at all well known; one (*On a Volé un Homme* [1933]) is lost; and opportunities to see the remainder are largely confined to the occasional touring retrospective. The neglect of *Yoshiwara* (1937) is therefore not unique. It is neither the most perfect of Ophuls' prewar French films (a title which would probably be claimed by the rather academic brilliance of *Sans Lendemain* [1939]) nor the most complex (I would choose *Werther* [1938], a masterly perversion of Goethe's novel which substantially improves on the self-indulgent romanticism of its literary source). But it is certainly the most underrated, not least by Ophuls himself, who dismissed it in interviews<sup>1</sup>; while most of those critics who have not ignored it have despised it. Typically the French line has been kinder than the Anglo-American: Lorenzo Codelli's account in *Positif* is the only really enthusiastic (albeit brief) recent discussion of the film that I have come across. Claude Beylie quotes several favourable extracts from the French reviewers of 1937; while acknowledging that "today's" audiences (today being 1963) find it dated, he extends qualified praise to Ophuls' efforts to imbue a "grotesque" scenario with "a kind of half-decorative, half-sentimental poetry". Richard Roud, on the other hand, finds it "grotesque" without qualification, while Susan White, in her book-length study of the director's work, relegates it to a footnote, condemns it for "pasteboard Japonism", and describes it as "a dime-store Mizoguchi"<sup>2</sup>. *Yoshiwara* certainly looks more like a Mizoguchi than almost any other European film I could name, and its premise—a woman descends into prostitution for the sake of a male friend or relative—is identical to that of *The Downfall of Osen* (1934). If Ophuls in 1937 could hardly have been familiar with an *oeuvre* which was to remain almost unknown in the West until the fifties, the recurrence in *Yoshiwara* of common Japanese plot motifs suggests at least a reasonable acquaintance with certain fundamental assumptions of Japanese culture<sup>3</sup>. As for "pasteboard Japonism", art directors Leon and André Barsacq were both distinguished professionals whose careers between them encompassed such richly atmospheric and meticulously detailed films as *L'Argent* (1928, Marcel L'Herbier), *La Marseillaise* (1938, Jean Renoir) and *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945, Marcel Carné). If their sets for *Yoshiwara* look a little fake, then it may be wisest to ascribe that to budgetary considerations. On the other hand, it may have been a deliberate stylistic choice, in which case one may, as Lorenzo Codelli does, admire the Sternbergian qualities of "an Orient made of cardboard and mysterious shadows."<sup>4</sup> Certainly to dismiss it for lack of realism is beside the point, and while I think that Ophuls' Japan is a rather more complex and plausible society than most Western representations of the Orient, I am no more concerned with its historical verisimilitude than I would be with that of his Vienna, Anno 1900, in an account



of *La Ronde* (1950). *Yoshiwara* interests me primarily as a film by Max Ophuls, and I intend in this essay to outline the thematic and stylistic qualities which would appear to make the film as personal a work as *Liebele* (1932), *Lola Montès* (1955) and *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948).

Because *Yoshiwara* is not at all well known, and because I intend to analyse it by examining a limited number of key sequences rather than through a scene-by-scene account, I should begin by providing a general plot summary. The film unfolds in the Yoshiwara red light district of Tokyo, and recounts a story of interracial romance between Kohana/Michiko Tanaka, a high-born geisha forced into prostitution to support her younger brother after their father's suicide, and Serge Polenoff/Pierre Richard-Willm, a Russian naval officer despatched to conduct a diplomatic mission in Japan on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5.<sup>5</sup> Also in love with Kohana is her former servant, Isamo/Sessue Hayakawa, now earning a living as a rickshaw driver and painter, whose jealousy makes him Serge's enemy. Serge's feeling for Kohana begins to compromise his mission, while the Japanese military authorities enlist Isamo to spy on him on their behalf. When Serge, entrusted with a vital document, is attacked and wounded by government hirelings, he is forced to ask Kohana to carry the paper for him. She is arrested and sentenced to death. Learning of her fate as he leaves Japan, Serge rows back to the mainland in the attempt to save her, but is too late. He dies of his wounds as she is executed by firing squad.

Like the Bavarian scenes of *Lola Montès*, this typically Ophulsian narrative is content to romanticise history, virtually ignoring the specific political causes of a conflict which it holds at arm's length except in so far as it impinges directly on the central love affair. All the same, the location and period setting of *Yoshiwara* are key to its meaning, though the complexity of Ophuls' treatment presumably eluded Japan's own prewar military government, who banned the film from distribution as "the disgrace of Japan", and condemned its stars, Sessue Hayakawa and Michiko Tanaka, as traitors<sup>6</sup>. Ophuls' portrait of Japan is certainly not complimentary, but he's no less aware of the shortcomings of European civilisation as personified by Serge and his cohorts. If the geisha system in *Yoshiwara* is basically free market capitalism at its most transparently destructive—people, and particularly women, reduced to objects for sale—then the Russians are happy to exploit it. It is, indeed, organised in no small part for their benefit. Moreover, the interracial character of the romance allows Ophuls to inflect his consistent theme—the destruction of a romantic relationship by external pressures—in ways which he otherwise did not pursue in his career. While the male protagonist is essentially admirable, Ophuls subtly makes clear a residual imperialism on his part, which will become a direct cause of the final tragedy. In this, *Yoshiwara* is

an especially significant addition to an *oeuvre* famous for its affectionate recreation of the older Europe in the period of its imperial and military glory: the self-assertion of Vienna, Anno 1900 looks rather different in the light of the Russo-Japanese war, Anno 1905, the first defeat of a European nation by a non-white race in a sustained modern military campaign.

*Yoshiwara* is also Ophuls' most explicit condemnation of prostitution, a subject which is a recurrent metaphor in his work.<sup>7</sup> The situation of the heroines in *Sans Lendemain*, *Caught* (1949) and *Lola Montès* is implicitly equated with that of prostitutes, often to subversive effect: *Caught* implies that bourgeois marriage may in many cases be a contract of purely financial significance. Other than *Yoshiwara*, however, the only film in which the topic is broached explicitly is *Le Plaisir* (1952), which for all its complexities of style and characterisation is both less trenchant and more tolerant than the earlier work. While the camerawork in *Le Plaisir* creates a sense of entrapment by viewing the interior of the brothel only from the outside through windows, that implied meaning is somewhat at odds with the essential equanimity of the script and cheerfulness of the performances (generally the dominant mood of Ophuls' last films is one of resignation rather than protest). In *Le Plaisir* the prostitutes are still free, if only temporarily, to escape their lot, and the movement from constricting studio interiors to rural locations is a concise visual expression of the liberation they find in their brief *partie de campagne*.

*Yoshiwara*, by contrast, moves from the open air to studio interiors, and the imprisonment of the heroine is, it seems, permanent and inescapable. The film opens in a Japanese garden, where Kohana learns from a priest that her father has committed suicide over an unpaid debt. Susan White—the main strength of whose book is its acknowledgement of the importance of material wealth in an *oeuvre* still too often appreciated simply as romance—has observed that "in Ophuls' work[...] debt is specifically attached to the crisis of masculinity: to be a man is to pay one's debts"<sup>8</sup>. With the suicide of her father, Kohana inherits both his debts and his role as breadwinner, an inheritance given symbolic expression as she is handed her father's sword. It is a cruel irony, expressive of the limited options open to women in this society, that her new-found status requires that she submit herself to prostitution to support her younger brother. Thereafter, exteriors are used only briefly in a lyrical interlude where Kohana leaves the brothel at night to meet her lover in a garden. Otherwise, the confinement of the drama within studio sets reflects Kohana's entrapment within the geisha house. As she enters the house, she is photographed repeatedly behind doors, barred windows, bannisters and net curtains; if these sets are "pasteboard Japonism", they nevertheless have a clear expressive function. The loss of freedom is encapsulated in one scene: the visit of her little brother, who brings her a gift of



flowers from the same garden. The effect is more than a mere pathos, though the contrast between her imprisonment and his freedom is simply stressed by the placement of the camera, which for much of their encounter looks out like her through bars at the world outside. Yet the gift carries complex implications: the boy can bring flowers because Kohana's sacrifice has preserved the garden as his property. The gift that he offers is bought with her imprisonment. Thus even this moment of fraternal affection recalls to mind the commercial structures of this society, structures confirmed a moment later when Serge arrives and the boy is chased away. Kohana's time, evidently, is money, and even Serge must back up his love with hard cash; a wealthy man, he is able to reserve her for his own attentions, whereas the servant Isamo, who also loves her, struggles in vain to raise the money to buy her free.

It is one of the film's limitations that Japanese life outside the geisha house is so scantily portrayed; even so, it is clear that the portrait of geisha servitude is a microcosm of the workings of this society as a whole. Ophuls' *Yoshiwara* is a society where prostitution is ubiquitous, literally in the geisha house, metaphorically in the surrounding underworld of poverty and exploitation, where Kohana's geisha house pimp is mirrored in the figure of the entrepreneur who exploits Isamo's creativity by selling his paintings at an inflated price and pocketing the difference. Art and sex become, alike, commodities, and Serge's companion, seeing Isamo's portrait of Kohana, converts art into pornography as he parodies the language of aesthetic appreciation: "Époque incontestablement entre la dix-septième et la dix-huitième année."<sup>9</sup> Isamo at least resists the commercialisation of his art; the portrait of Kohana is not for sale. In this it contrasts with the situation of Kohana herself, who, as Serge enquires about the portrait, is seen paraded in front of the geisha house for the attention of possible customers. Here the camera position emphasises her status as an object by remaining at a distance, as if representing the gaze of the watching Russian officers who are invited to buy.

The film's critique of Western imperialism is somewhat tempered by the general cruelty of the indigenous society as depicted by Ophuls, but it is crucial that its most oppressive aspects exist for the benefit of foreigners, a point brought home by the recurrent concern with language. It is a rule of the geisha house that foreign clients must be greeted in their native tongue, and in an early scene we hear Kohana and the other recent recruits obediently recite pleasantries in English, Russian, Spanish and French, the last being the most elaborate ("Bonjour, Monsieur, comment allez-vous? Paris est une ville charmante"). Although the white characters are supposed to be Russian, the actors, the dialogue and the presumed audience are of course French, so this comically standardised greeting serves to implicate the film's viewers in the oppression of these foreign prostitutes. On arrival in Japan, the Russian officers indulge in nasty gossip about geishas which assumes their status as nothing more than sexual objects: the question "Do you speak Japanese?" is dismissed with the words, "Do you need to talk to geishas?" Only Serge, who initially meets Kohana when he rescues her from the over-enthusiastic atten-

tions of her first Russian customer, recognises that these women might be deserving of fully human treatment, and his reassuring remark to Kohana that "not all white men are savages" tellingly inverts Western generalisations about foreign races. It is significant that Serge refuses to make the sexual demands that, as a geisha, she expects of him, until she herself returns his love. But even Serge's behaviour is not without presumption, and his divided loyalties, to Kohana and to his country, will finally induce him to place her in danger for Russia's sake. The casting of Pierre Richard-Willm gains interest in retrospect through his later appearance in the title role of Ophuls' *Werther*, another film where the hero's apparently selfless romantic passion is seen to impose an insoluble dilemma on the object of his desire. In both films, her reciprocation of his love brings no lasting happiness, but in *Yoshiwara* the consequences are more extreme: while Charlotte/Annie Vernay in *Werther* rejects the hero's advances and simply resigns herself to a loveless marriage, Kohana accepts them and is destroyed as a consequence.<sup>10</sup>

The point is made most forcefully in the film's finest and most famous sequence—Barry Salt has rashly gone so far as to call it "the only thing of any interest in the film"<sup>11</sup>—as Serge invites Kohana to return with him to Russia. For the first time in the film, she is seen in Western dress; she shrinks from her unfamiliar reflection in the mirror until Serge—gently but firmly—steers her back, his love here expressing itself in a subtly coercive form. Then, as he describes the sights and customs of Russia, they are visualised in an imaginary voyage which rivals the great scene of the fairground train journey in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, where hero and heroine sit together in a mock carriage as painted backdrops of European holiday destinations are scrolled past mechanically by a hard-working attendant. There, in one of the most obviously Brechtian passages in Ophuls' career, the fake backdrops instantly cast doubt on their declarations of undying love, hinting that those romantic hopes may be as false and insubstantial as the reproductions of landscape that pass behind them. The technique is duplicated exactly in *Yoshiwara's* imaginary sleigh ride, where a table and chair are metamorphosed by special effects into a sledge which carries Serge and Kohana along in front of a paint-and-cardboard St Petersburg. Anticipating *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the sequence also looks back to *Liebeleli*, where the lovers' sleigh ride—a romantic voyage through the snowy fields where the hero will ultimately die in a duel—becomes a symbol of transient happiness and a portent of tragedy. A similar sense of foreboding is created by the other images of Russian life which illustrate Serge's verbal description: the appearance out of thin air of a Russian opera house and a banquet-laden table. The charm of this hopeful fantasy is disrupted by reminders that it is precisely that. As Serge applauds his imagined singers, Kohana looks up startled, for the action evokes the code of the geisha house, where clapping was used to summon attention and issue commands to the women. Even as Serge talks hopefully of Kohana's integration into Russian society, the action reminds us of the cultural gulfs and national conflicts which will soon part them. Likewise, the imaginary banquet is

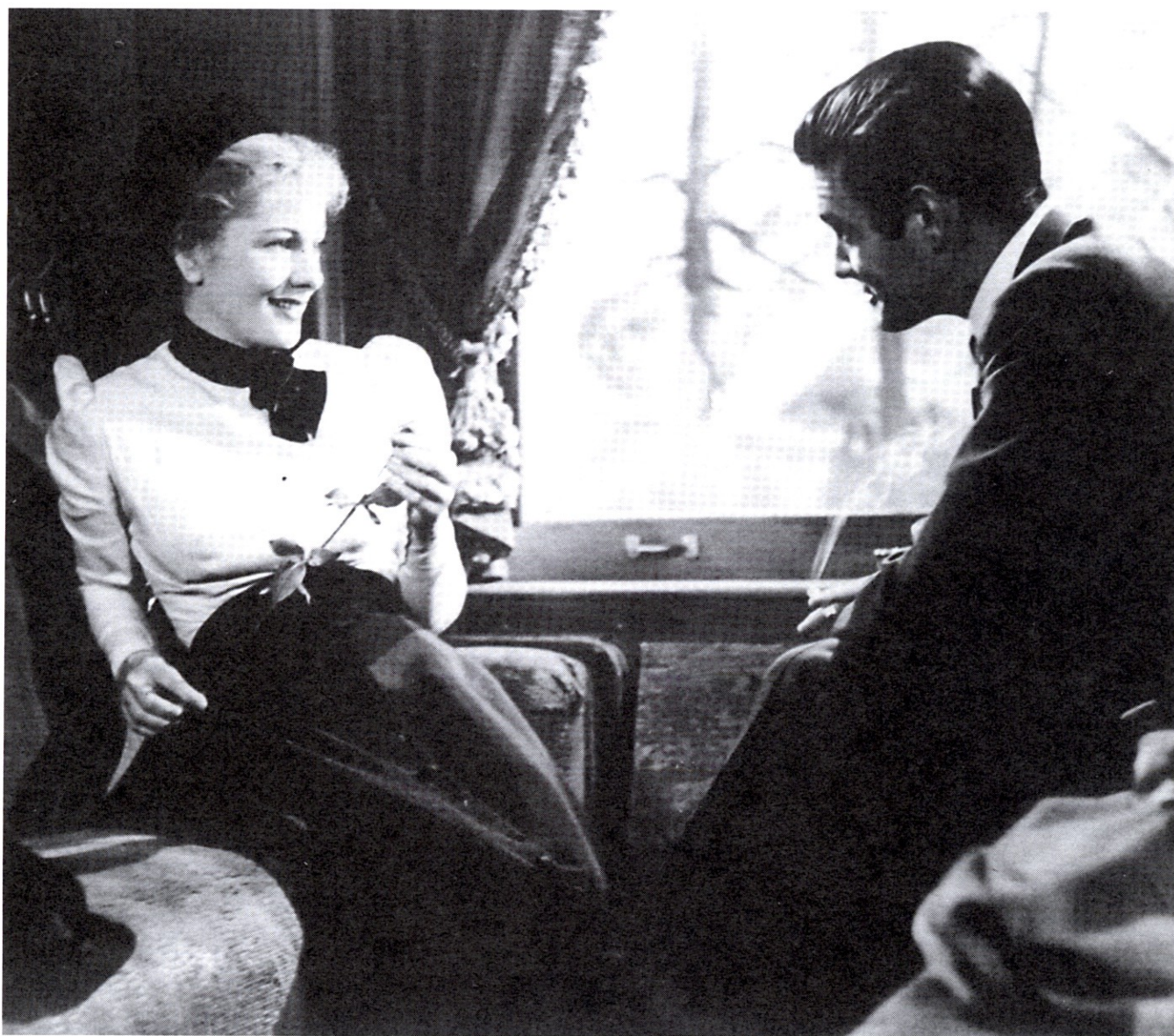


attended by Cossack dancers: ostensibly charming, but made to appear sinister by Ophüls' staging. Dressed entirely in black, the dancers appear threatening, shadowy shapes, especially as one of them moves closer and closer to the camera, finally blocking our view of the lovers entirely, and, as he does so, bringing the fantasy to an end. If Serge has tried to portray his home country as their salvation, the menacing Cossack reveals it as a threat. And it is, indeed, during this scene that a messenger arrives with the secret document which will finally prove Kohana's undoing. Serge's first loyalty will prove to be to his country rather than his lover, and her safety will be subordinated to the political advantage of a foreign nation. Russia, in fact, will destroy her; it is while carrying the document at Serge's request that she will be arrested and shot.

At first sight, the tragic ending of *Yoshiwara* appears to duplicate a plot motif familiar from much romantic melodrama: the unworthy (usually sexually transgressive) heroine who

sacrifices her private happiness and/or her life for the public success of the man she loves. The device is typically sexist in so far as it rests on the assumption that female emotions are insignificant compared to the political achievements of a man of destiny: the renunciation of Napoleon/Charles Boyer by Marie Walewska/Greta Garbo in *Conquest* (1937, Clarence Brown) is a not untypical example. *Yoshiwara* is certainly a film about love versus duty, but the distinction here is not so simple. Kohana's sacrifice takes the form not of renunciation, but of a fatal reaffirmation of loving commitment; she is required not to withdraw passively to the sidelines, but rather to take an active role in furthering her lover's political aims.

I have argued that the thematic similarities between *Yoshiwara* and certain works of Mizoguchi can only be coincidental, but they remain suggestive. The theme of female sacrifice for a close male friend or relative is a repeated motif in Japanese cinema during the thirties. In *Tears Behind Victory*



*Letter From an Unknown Woman*: Ophüls and a Brechtian device.



(1931, Shigeyoshi Suzuki), *Apart From You* (1933, Mikio Naruse) and *A Woman of Tokyo* (1934, Yasujiro Ozu), the man in question is a younger brother, in Mizoguchi's films, *Cascading White Threads* (1933) and *The Downfall of Osen*, a lover.<sup>12</sup> While neither Ophuls nor his co-screenwriters nor (I presume) the author of the original novel could have known about these specific films, the theme is widespread in Japanese narratives, and is clearly related to social expectations in Japan at the time: indeed, the young Mizoguchi benefited from the financial support of an elder sister who herself became a geisha. The motif had carried over to Western representations of Japan in *Madame Butterfly*, a frequent reference point for critics of *Yoshiwara*.<sup>13</sup> In Puccini's opera the foreign lover is portrayed as a villain from the start, and Butterfly sacrifices her life for the sake of her baby son; the exact equivalent would be a version of *Yoshiwara* in which Serge proved faithless and Kohana gave her life for her young brother. The significant differences between opera and film have the effect, firstly, of making the heroine less a passive victim, more an active participant (the emphasis falling on her free romantic commitment to a lover, rather than family obligation to a child), secondly, of making the tragedy more a consequence of specific political circumstances, less an "inevitable" result of miscegenation. *Yoshiwara* rejects the racist assumptions which, for all the sympathy extended to the heroine, underlie the narrative of *Madame Butterfly*; indeed, while the Hollywood version of the latter (directed in 1932 by Marion Gering) was made before the Production Code tightened its grip, its message would surely have warmed the hearts of Messrs Hays and Breen.

By contrast, the specific political concerns of *Yoshiwara* go some way to challenging Andrew Britton's objections to the "pessimistic, romantic nihilism" of Ophuls' worldview, which, he has argued, makes the tragic development of his films seem pre-ordained by an external fate.<sup>14</sup> To a certain extent *Yoshiwara* is open to such charges, and the symbolism of candles and wind—the paper lanterns that Kohana lights in celebration of her relationship with Serge, the breeze bringing back the ship that will carry Serge away—would seem to sustain a view of human actions as determined by forces over which we have no control. But the meaning is not so general, just as the returning ship is no mere harbinger of doom, but comes to perform a specific military duty. Earlier in the film, the lovers had together visited a candlelit chapel built by Russian missionaries, where they enacted a mock marriage service. At the film's climax, it is to the chapel that the dying Serge returns. But the candle which he lights before the altar, and which falls to the floor at the moment of Kohana's death, does not only recall the candles in the previous visit to the chapel, or even the paper lanterns which Kohana lit. In a symbolic expression of the gulfs between cultures, it looks back also to the incense which Kohana burned before a Buddhist statue in the geisha house as she prayed for her lover's return: a prayer that was answered, sooner than she could have hoped, by Serge's entrance with the document which would lead to her death. Like the tragic lovers of *Liebeleli*, *Madame de...* (1953) and *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, Serge and

Kohana die apart—she shot for treason in the Yoshiwara by Japanese soldiers; he of his wounds in the chapel, mourned by Russian officers who cross themselves as he expires. Lantern, incense, altar light—the symbolism is not banal, but a vital expression of the cultural and political differences which, more than any overriding fate, part these lovers and destroy them.

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I would like to express my gratitude to Steve Pickles for the loan of a rare video copy of *Yoshiwara*, and to Michael Walker for all his help, advice and encouragement.

#### NOTES

1 Ophuls was interviewed shortly before his death by *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut; on learning that they had seen *Yoshiwara*, he replied "You shouldn't have." See 'Interview with Max Ophuls', in *Ophuls* (London, BFI, 1978), ed. Paul Willemen, pp15-30 (p18).

2 In order, I cite from Lorenzo Codelli: 'Ophuls après Ophuls', in *Positif* 232/233 (July/Aug, 1980), pp34-36; Claude Beylie: *Max Ophuls* (Paris, Seghous, 1963), p56; Richard Roud: *Max Ophuls: an Index* (London, BFI, 1958), p21; and Susan White: *The Cinema of Max Ophuls* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1995), p348.

3 I have not been able to track down a copy of the novel by Maurice Dekobra on which *Yoshiwara* is based, nor do I know anything about the author's life. Therefore I have no way of knowing how many of the relevant plot motifs derive from Ophuls' source, and how many are his (he is credited as co-writer) additions.

4 Codelli, p35.

5 There is some debate as to the precise date of the action; the date of c. 1904 seems most plausible to me given the political context, but some sources state that the film is set c. 1890 before the Sino-Japanese War, some as early as the 1860s. The former seems possible, the latter most unlikely, but in any case the eventual outbreak of Russo-Japanese conflict is clearly a fundamental context in this story of a Russo-Japanese love affair, just as, in *De Mayerling a Sarajevo* (1940), the eventual outbreak of World War II is a fundamental context in a story of a love affair which ended in the outbreak of World War I.

6 On the other hand, perhaps the meaning was only too clear. The feminist and anti-militarist concerns of Ophuls' film can hardly have endeared themselves to the feudal authorities. For information as regards the fate of the film in Japan, I am indebted to Cecilia Segawa Seigle: *Yoshiwara—the Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan* (Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 1993), pp10-11. The author describes the film as a mid-nineteenth century melodrama and calls Ophuls himself a French director (he was to take French citizenship, but not until 1938). I trust her description of the film's fate on its Japanese release is more accurate.

7 In theory, at least, geishas are not prostitutes. It may be that Ophuls has deliberately set out to show the geisha system in a state of corruption; or he may simply, like many West-erners, have assumed that the two classes of women were identical. The confusion is exacerbated by the impossibility, even in France, of dealing explicitly with sexual matters on screen in 1937. For the purposes of this discussion I shall use the terms interchangeably.

8 White, p53.

9 The joke cannot very readily be translated. The speaker is identifying the subject's age—seventeen or eighteen years—using vocabulary which would more expectedly be applied to the age of the painting: seventeenth or eighteenth century.

10 The excellence of *Werther* is also barely appreciated. The essay by Michael Walker in this issue is the first to do justice to its achievement.

11 Salt: *Film Style and Technology – History and Analysis* (London, Starword, 1983), p304.

12 This motif is also, of course, common in Ophuls' work; he was to recapitulate the theme of a woman sacrificing herself for a young male relative in *Sans Lendemain*. The treatment in *Yoshiwara*, however, is appreciably more complex and less sentimental.

13 See for instance Codelli, p34, and White, p349. Coincidentally, star Michiko Tanaka, who plays Kohana, was to take a supporting role in a 1955 film version of *Madame Butterfly*, directed by Carmine Gallone in Italy.

14 Britton, in 'Lola Montès Discussion', *Movie* 29-30 (Summer 1982), pp108-21 (p118).



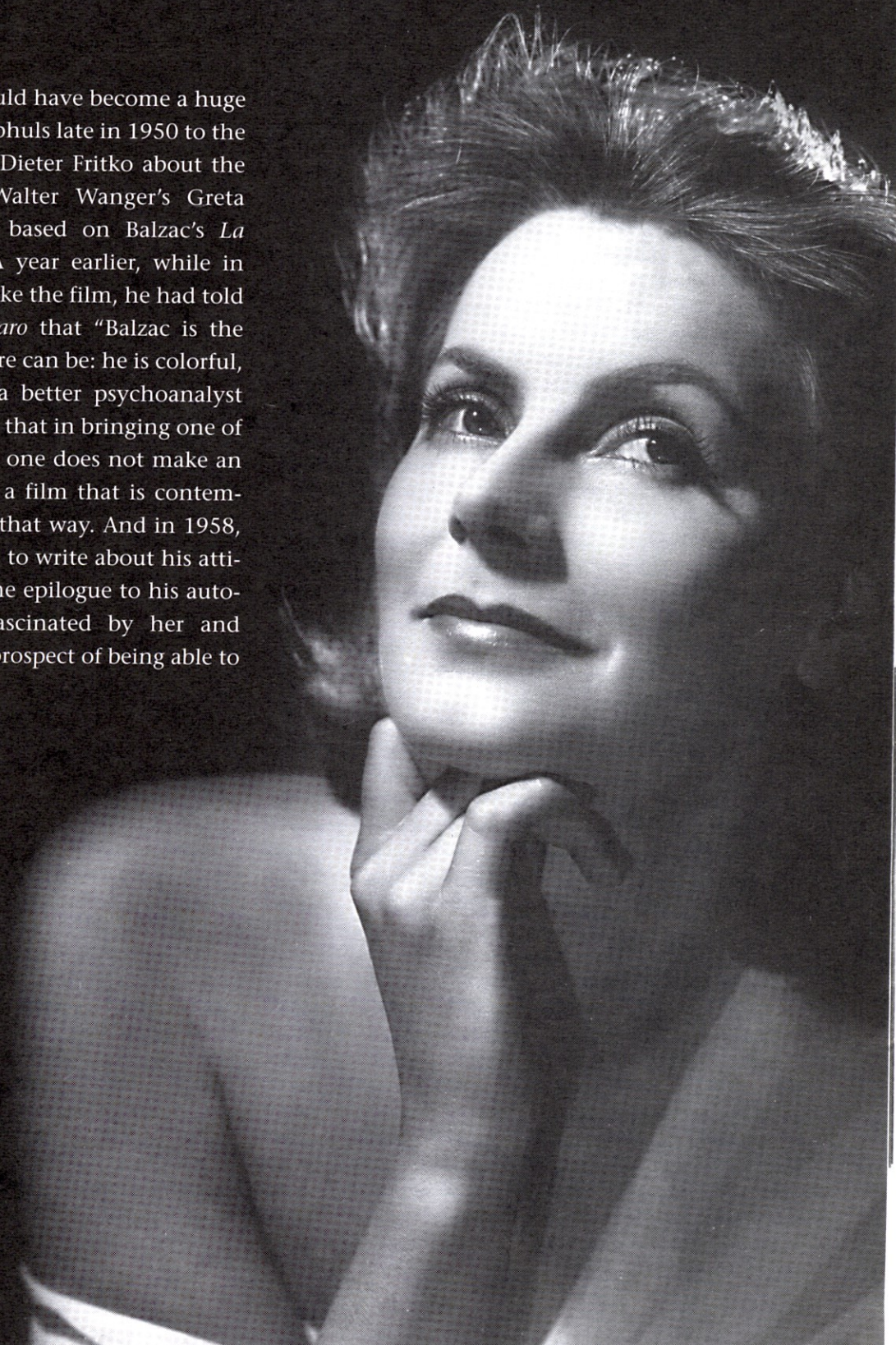
# Captivated by Garbo

MAX OPHULS' ROMAN INTERLUDE  
WITH *THE DUCHESS OF LANGEAIS*

By Lutz Bacher

A pity forever! That would have become a huge success," sighed Max Ophuls late in 1950 to the *Frankfurter Rundschau's* Dieter Fritko about the demise of producer Walter Wanger's Greta Garbo project, a film based on Balzac's *La Duchesse de Langeais*. A year earlier, while in Paris, still waiting to make the film, he had told Paul Carriere of *Le Figaro* that "Balzac is the most modern writer there can be: he is colorful, ironic, nervous; he is a better psychoanalyst than Freud. I am certain that in bringing one of his works to the screen, one does not make an old-fashioned film, but a film that is contemporary and will remain that way. And in 1958, Ophuls' wife, Hilde, was to write about his attitude toward Garbo in the epilogue to his autobiography: "He was fascinated by her and hence happy about the prospect of being able to

Greta Garbo publicity portrait  
from the late 30s, MGM.





work with her."<sup>1</sup> All these remarks suggest that Ophuls very much wanted to direct Garbo in her come-back attempt and that consequently the break-up of a particular package of distribution arrangements with American, British, and Italian partners during one early September week in Rome troubled him greatly. I will argue here that, quite to the contrary, Ophuls felt relief over the collapse of the project's Italian arrangements and that his expression of regret referred to a later vision of the film. Looking at the episode from his perspective as a filmmaker, I will attempt to show why the proposed production context did not appear to Ophuls to be favoring his working methods and vision of the film.<sup>2</sup>

On June 11, 1949, after finding the solution to vexing structural problems of the screenplay for *The Ballad and the Source* (*Ballad*), Ophuls had sent a cable to Wanger, then in Rome for negotiations regarding the production of both *Ballad* and the *The Duchess of Langeais* (*Duchess*): "Cheer up, camera will start booming excessively at proper date." Ten days later, with Wanger now in New York City, he wrote, "I suggest a story conference on *The Ballad and the Source* with you as president, Joan [Bennett], [writers Irmgard von] Cube, [Allen] Vincent, set and costume designers for Monday morning June 27, 9 o'clock sharp, at Schwab's Drugstore."<sup>3</sup> Ophuls was nearing the end of a period of contentious collaboration with von Cube and the concurrent supervision of *The Reckless Moment*'s postproduction at Columbia Studios as Wanger's surrogate. He felt confident, happily in charge of preparing his next film for production, despite the nearly ceaseless demands on his creative and physical energies that spring.

But when Wanger returned to Hollywood, he had a new agenda. Having failed in Europe in his quest to make arrangements for financial backing, establish an organizational framework, and procure the talent for production of *Ballad* and *Duchess* concurrently or at least with overlapping periods of principal photography, he was persuaded by Garbo's insistence on a September 1st start date and, very likely, also the better prospects for financing *Duchess* to proceed with his Walter Wanger International company's European production program for now only with the Garbo project.

The change in priorities immediately encountered a major obstacle, however. Unlike von Cube and Vincent working with Ophuls, Sally Benson, an author of well-regarded short stories for *The New Yorker*, novelist ("Meet Me in St. Louis") as well as a successful screen writer (including a collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock on *Shadow of a Doubt*), had not been able to complete the "shootable" screenplay she had promised Wanger before he left for Europe and essentially lost contact with her because she could only be reached through her agent. Having just observed Ophuls' skill as a "script doctor" for the *Ballad* screenplay, Wanger realized he might solve his *Duchess* problems as well. Yet he hesitated, accepting Benson's promise to make improvements herself. On his other suddenly pressing task of finding a director for *Duchess*, though, Wanger acted almost immediately. Because Carol Reed, Vittorio De Sica, Jean Cocteau, and Joshua Logan had been unable or unwilling to direct his film, he now asked Ophuls to switch assignments, to direct *Duchess* during the

period he had contracted to do *Ballad* while remaining on standby for the latter. Ophuls agreed. Garbo, whose contract gave her director approval, accepted Ophuls after seeing *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and meeting with him, Wanger, and, Eugene Frenke, Wanger's partner, at her home on July 6.

Though still dealing with the last steps of *The Reckless Moment*'s postproduction, Ophuls began work on *Duchess* well ahead of his July 18 start date with a July 8th screening at Columbia of the 1947 French film adaptation of the novel. But he did not begin with script revisions until July 19, after Benson's attempt at improvements had failed and he had been released from a brief hospitalization, an early manifestation of his heart problems. In the subsequent three weeks of working intensively with screen writer Harold Goldman and conferring as well with James and Pamela Mason, some of whose ideas he integrated, Ophuls began to effect changes in characterization, dialogue and visualization in Benson's 147-page screenplay of Balzac's story of an ex-Napoleonic officer's (Armand de Montriveau) passion for and rejection by a coquettish aristocrat (Antoinette de Langeais), whose belated discovery of her love for him dooms them both. As early as July 29th, Ophuls commented in a letter to Wanger on his intentions to make Garbo's duchess part less strident, softer, more human.

The shooting script's closing scene shows that Ophuls had also already introduced elements of his visual style. Its expressive camera moves in a manner akin to the church sequence's in *Le Plaisir* (1952) and ends in stasis with the duchess' death. Still, the 131-page revision, the last of whose pages are dated August 18, just two days before Ophuls' departure, merely ended the writing process. It did not complete it to his satisfaction. Even as he was still collaborating with Goldman, he rushed through a rough French translation of the script, that was to be as much a point of departure for further revisions by Andre-Paul Antoine in Paris as a basis of Frenke's pre-production planning.

The imperative to devote himself to screenplay revisions kept Ophuls removed almost entirely from the other tasks of the pre-production process, participation in which he would have insisted on under other circumstances. Soon after accepting the assignment, though, he had requested Wanger pursue cinematographer Franz Planer and Wanger had seen Planer, who was, however, otherwise committed. It is also likely that he discussed casting with James Mason (himself cast as de Montriveau), who suggested such British players as Jack Hawkins, Frank Allenby, Geoffrey Keen, and Frederick Lester to Wanger. But the producer had not acted on those recommendations as late as a week before the originally anticipated September 1st start date. The hastiness of the *Duchess* preparations is highlighted by comparison with the periods between contract start dates and production start dates of Ophuls' other American films, for which he had the further advantage of being at the studio production site for the whole process. For *The Exile*, that period had been almost six months; for *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, on which he began work before the contract date, nine weeks; for *Caught*,



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work with her."<sup>1</sup> All these remarks suggest that Ophuls very much wanted to direct Garbo in her come-back attempt and that consequently the break-up of a particular package of distribution arrangements with American, British, and Italian partners during one early September week in Rome troubled him greatly. I will argue here that, quite to the contrary, Ophuls felt relief over the collapse of the project's Italian arrangements and that his expression of regret referred to a later vision of the film. Looking at the episode from his perspective as a filmmaker, I will attempt to show why the proposed production context did not appear to Ophuls to be favoring his working methods and vision of the film.<sup>2</sup>

On June 11, 1949, after finding the solution to vexing structural problems of the screenplay for *The Ballad and the Source* (*Ballad*), Ophuls had sent a cable to Wanger, then in Rome for negotiations regarding the production of both *Ballad* and the *The Duchess of Langeais* (*Duchess*): "Cheer up, camera will start booming excessively at proper date." Ten days later, with Wanger now in New York City, he wrote, "I suggest a story conference on *The Ballad and the Source* with you as president, Joan [Bennett], [writers Irmgard von] Cube, [Allen] Vincent, set and costume designers for Monday morning June 27, 9 o'clock sharp, at Schwab's Drugstore."<sup>3</sup> Ophuls was nearing the end of a period of contentious collaboration with von Cube and the concurrent supervision of *The Reckless Moment*'s postproduction at Columbia Studios as Wanger's surrogate. He felt confident, happily in charge of preparing his next film for production, despite the nearly ceaseless demands on his creative and physical energies that spring.

But when Wanger returned to Hollywood, he had a new agenda. Having failed in Europe in his quest to make arrangements for financial backing, establish an organizational framework, and procure the talent for production of *Ballad* and *Duchess* concurrently or at least with overlapping periods of principal photography, he was persuaded by Garbo's insistence on a September 1st start date and, very likely, also the better prospects for financing *Duchess* to proceed with his Walter Wanger International company's European production program for now only with the Garbo project.

The change in priorities immediately encountered a major obstacle, however. Unlike von Cube and Vincent working with Ophuls, Sally Benson, an author of well-regarded short stories for *The New Yorker*, novelist ("Meet Me in St. Louis") as well as a successful screen writer (including a collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock on *Shadow of a Doubt*), had not been able to complete the "shootable" screenplay she had promised Wanger before he left for Europe and essentially lost contact with her because she could only be reached through her agent. Having just observed Ophuls' skill as a "script doctor" for the *Ballad* screenplay, Wanger realized he might solve his *Duchess* problems as well. Yet he hesitated, accepting Benson's promise to make improvements herself. On his other suddenly pressing task of finding a director for *Duchess*, though, Wanger acted almost immediately. Because Carol Reed, Vittorio De Sica, Jean Cocteau, and Joshua Logan had been unable or unwilling to direct his film, he now asked Ophuls to switch assignments, to direct *Duchess* during the

period he had contracted to do *Ballad* while remaining on standby for the latter. Ophuls agreed. Garbo, whose contract gave her director approval, accepted Ophuls after seeing *Letter From an Unknown Woman* and meeting with him, Wanger, and, Eugene Frenke, Wanger's partner, at her home on July 6.

Though still dealing with the last steps of *The Reckless Moment*'s postproduction, Ophuls began work on *Duchess* well ahead of his July 18 start date with a July 8th screening at Columbia of the 1947 French film adaptation of the novel. But he did not begin with script revisions until July 19, after Benson's attempt at improvements had failed and he had been released from a brief hospitalization, an early manifestation of his heart problems. In the subsequent three weeks of working intensively with screen writer Harold Goldman and conferring as well with James and Pamela Mason, some of whose ideas he integrated, Ophuls began to effect changes in characterization, dialogue and visualization in Benson's 147-page screenplay of Balzac's story of an ex-Napoleonic officer's (Armand de Montriveau) passion for and rejection by a coquettish aristocrat (Antoinette de Langeais), whose belated discovery of her love for him dooms them both. As early as July 29th, Ophuls commented in a letter to Wanger on his intentions to make Garbo's duchess part less strident, softer, more human.

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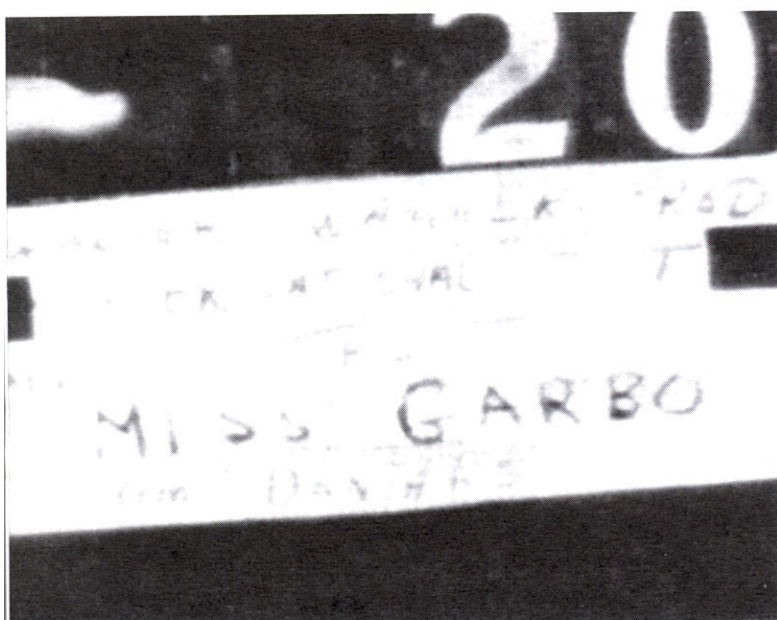


Wanger spoke of his worries about the Amato Group's pulling out on the basis of the uncertainty of the American part of the present financing and distribution arrangements for *Duchess*. All the same, he still seemed full of optimism about the chances of salvaging the Roman production plans, pointing to some alternative strategies for covering the Italian production costs.

Once Ophuls had gotten past the various barriers the hotel had put in place to secure Garbo's quarters, he found her to be far less sanguine about the prospects of working in Rome. After having been chased by paparazzi and reporters on her excursion with Schlee to museums and the beach at Ostia and besieged by autograph hunters everywhere she went on Saturday, she now felt unable to leave the hotel. She dreaded having to live this way for another two months.<sup>5</sup>

At Scalera, with general manager Roberto Dandi showing him around, few preparations for shooting were evident. Frenke and production manager Gordon Griffith, who had been in Rome since August 22 and 23, respectively, attempting to set up production, had been able to do very little, stymied by the Amato's Group's lack of commitment to the project and a consequent lack of funds. The tentative agreement with them had called for Amato to "supply everything required in Italy for the production of the picture. Therefore, he will supply stages, technical equipment, architect, costumes, wigs, decor, living expenses for all actors, directors, producers, personnel, etc., local and foreign, transportation within Italy etc." Wanger had told Frenke in telegrams to "be sure to do everything through him as we have no right to

make commitments otherwise" and "they will make all deals and hire personnel." Hence Frenke and Griffith had been limited to dealing with those few budget items to be paid by Wanger in U.S. funds, a few American crew members—"gaffer, script girl, sound mixer"—film and some equipment—"Mitchell camera, baby spots, and tape recorder." They had busied themselves with purchasing Dupont raw stock and looking for the Mitchells, planning to take over the equipment of a departing American company. The more significant matter of the sound mixer had hinged more on Wanger's desire to take advantage of the savings the new tape recording technology offered than on the ability of the mixer. Henigson had suggested Wanger contact the Columbia Sound Department for the name and whereabouts of a Columbia mixer who "was over here for a long time in Rome and who had a hand in developing the tape recorder." Ophuls' urgent request for de Bretagne hence had fallen by the wayside. To his credit, Wanger had raised the matter of having a camera boom available, but nothing beyond the studio's two dollies—one standard, the other large—was on site. As for the key personnel to be hired by Amato, principally the design functions—set, costume, decoration, it is possible that Ophuls' request for D'Eaubonne might have been fulfilled. He had, after all, worked at Scalera Studios on the French *La Chartreuse de Parme* (Christian-Jaque, 1948) in 1947 and more recently on Eddie Small's runaway super production, *Black Magic* (Gregory Ratoff, 1948). What mitigated against this possibility were the absurdly low budget allocations to set construction. Notwithstanding Henigson's having comment-



William Daniels' screen test of Garbo for *La Duchesse de Langeais*



ed to Wanger after a careful reading of the script, that he was "inclined to feel that you would have to do an awful lot of building here," the tentative budget allocated only \$22,000 (in lire) to set construction, as compared to \$84,190 for the much smaller *The Reckless Moment*. Similarly, the wardrobe design budget to be paid in pounds and hence to be used in England was only \$5,000, apparently to be spent primarily on Garbo's costumes, while the rental and purchase budget for Italy alone was \$18,750. It appears, then, that the *Duchess* production was to have relied largely on existing sets and wardrobe. For a director whose style relied on intensive and careful collaboration with designers, effecting with set designers the coordination of set "layout" and camera blocking crucial to his trademark fluidity, doing without such planning was a dismal prospect and virtually unprecedented in his career.

If Ophuls did visit Henigson at Cinecitta, he had an opportunity to look in on Rene Clair, shooting *La Beaute du diable*, and witness the extensive preparations for the production of *Quo Vadis*, which in their careful organization and large scale were the opposite of those for *Duchess* at Scalera. But Henigson spoke of the drawbacks of working in Italy: how the influx of so many American productions over the past eighteen months had driven up crew wages; how quickly the industry's excitement over visiting American stars and directors had been replaced by jaded indifference; how many Italians perceived the American scandal over Ingrid Bergman's affair with Roberto Rossellini as anti-Italian and responded with anti-American attitudes.<sup>6</sup> He had no reason,

ultimately, to reverse the advice he had given to Wanger in July: "I am somewhat at a loss to understand why you wish to make this picture in Italy. By all means, it should be made in its entirety in France, and I am inclined to feel that your costs in France should not be any higher than your costs here in Italy—they should be less."

The Amato Group canceled their deal later that day, soon after cinematographer James Wong Howe's arrival. As Ophuls was coming down with a cold or flu that kept him hotel-room-bound for all of Tuesday, Wanger and Frenke were frantically trying to either restore that deal or find a substitute for it. One offer came quickly, as it had essentially been in abeyance, an updating of a deal Wanger had rejected in favor of the Amato Group's. In early August, Wanger had engaged Arrigo Colombo, an English-speaking Italian production executive who had been assistant director on *Black Magic*, to find Italian backers and become his "Italian advisor," if he succeeded. By mid-August, Colombo had mediated a deal with Michele Scalera, president of Scalera Studios and a wealthy contractor, which, however, offered a lower budget than the Amato Group deal. "In order for Scalera to obtain the Government subsidies," Colombo had written, "he would have to organize the production, which will go also to your advantage because in this way you can rest assured he will try to spend what is right and no more." On the other hand, Colombo had felt "that Scalera is very much sold on the project and would go all the way to give you the best. It is a very well known fact that, once the pictures start in the Scalera studios, the old man falls in love with the work and is very



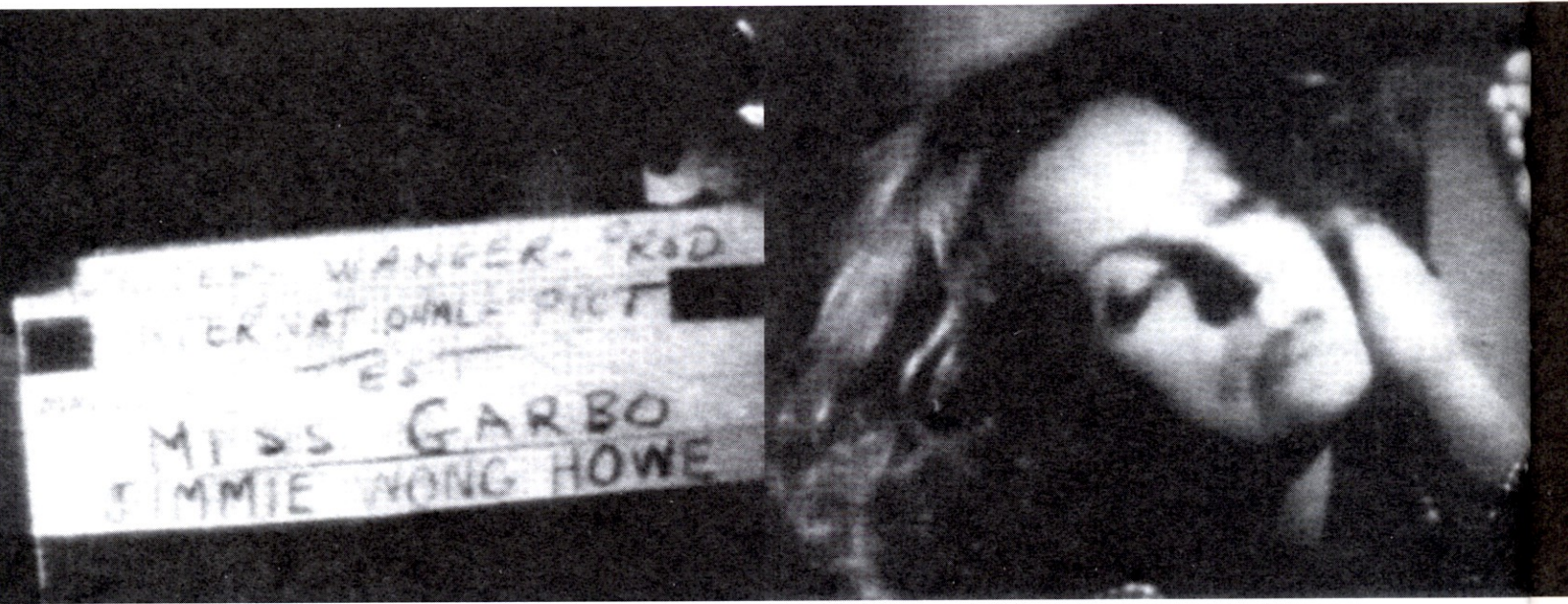


generous. You have nothing to worry if additional money is needed." Colombo had noted, furthermore, that "Max Ophuls is a long time personal friend of Mr. Dandi, General Manager of Scalera film. It is certain that Mr. Dandi will really go out of his way to make the work of Mr. Ophuls pleasant and easy." Dandi was, in fact, the only Italian production executive Ophuls had described favorably in his "Guide Rose" as "a comparatively honest and capable producer." In the virtual certainty of having to use *La Chartreuse de Parme's* costumes and sets as well as Italian "palaces where we could shoot the main part of your picture," the Scalera deal paralleled the Amato Group's. But Scalera's strong urging to replace James Mason with an Italian star, Rossano Brazzi, represented another drawback for Ophuls.

The new deal Scalera Studios offered to the now desperate Wanger replaced Michele Scalera with another chief financier identified only as "Mr. Olean" (hence the "Olean deal") in a crudely worded September 6 deal memo. Significantly, it also added another production supervisory level to the original offer's studio hierarchy: an American production executive associated with Olean, Mike Frankovich, who—very likely with Colombo—had initiated the deal. Until recently a unit producer at Republic Studios, Frankovich had, since January 1949, temporarily settled in Italy with his wife, actress Binnie Barnes, in order to produce with his Venus Productions (an Italian company) what were essentially Italian films (for Republic distribution in the U.S.), with only the key creative positions (screenwriter, director) and a few starring roles to be filled by Americans. They corresponded to upper level

Republic B productions, made with lower-cost Italian labor. Venus' first project, *The Dark Road*, written by Philip Yordan, directed by Sidney Salkow, and starring Binnie Barnes and Janis Paige was then on Scalera's stages.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, the Olean deal offered to turn *Duchess* into such a project. The deal memo demanded even more control over the production process and provided even less potential profit for Walter Wanger International than the Scalera deal, though now Mason was to be contractually a part of the package. In return for financing the "totality of Mr. Walter Wanger's obligations...up to a maximum \$300,000 dollars" as well as the Italian portion, formerly offered by Rizzoli "up to maximum of \$250,000,000 Italian Lire" (i.e., about \$416,700), thus a total amount of \$716,700, about \$100,000 less than the Amato Group's budget, Olean would "recuperate monies from the first worldwide returns up to the total amount of both above mentioned advancements." Then, after paying deferments of up to \$145,000, all other returns would be split 55 to 45 percent between Wanger and Olean, respectively. The memo also outlined tight control over the production, with all expenditures to be co-signed by either Mr. Mike Frankovich or Mr. Roberto Dandi, to whom Olean "delegated all technical and administrative control," on the Scalera side and Wanger or Frenke on the Walter Wanger International side: "every order, every authorization for expenditure, every paycheck will bear the signature of both representatives of the two parties." It is not surprising that Wanger resisted those terms and constraints, but negotiations with Dandi and Frankovich to mitigate them continued



James Wong Howe's screen test of Garbo for *La Duchesse de Langeais*



through the week and a partnership with Olean-Frankovich remained a possibility until at least October, when Frenke urged Wanger to "get in touch with them, since they are still most definitely interested in this project."

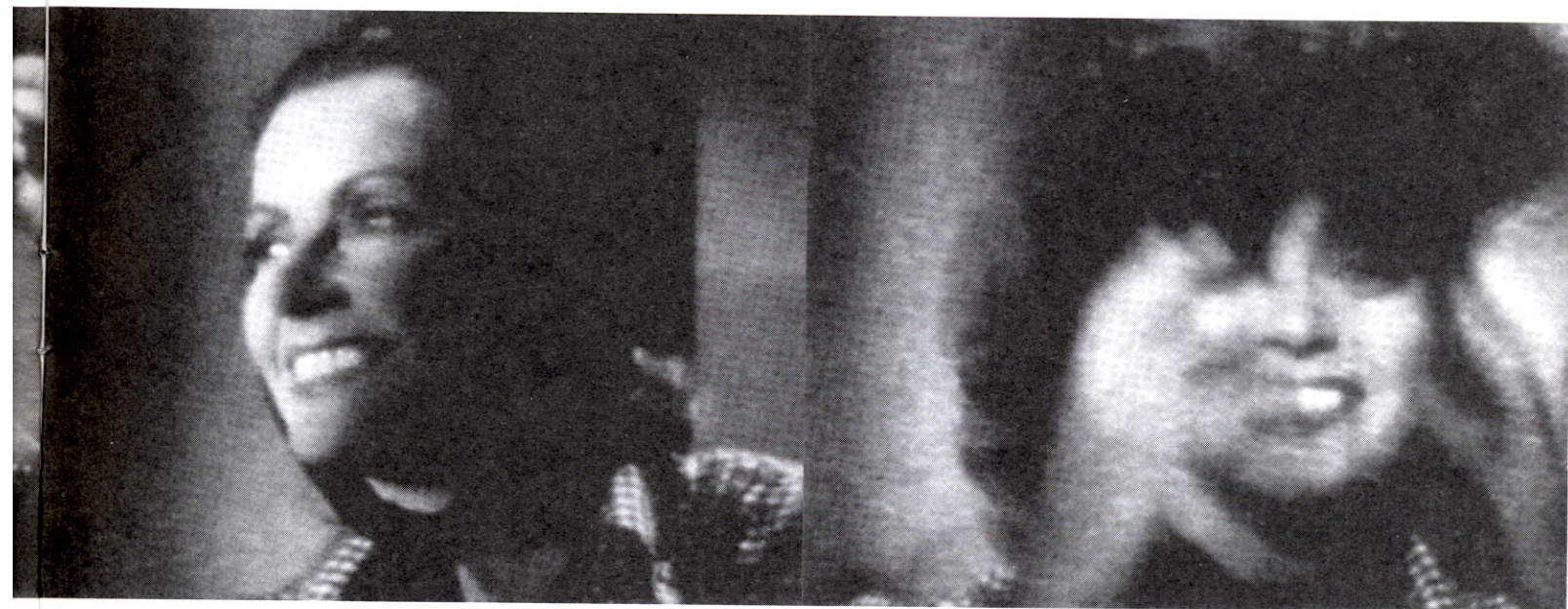
Wanger aired some of his rancor vis-à-vis Scalera in comments to *Variety* on his return to the U.S. in December, declaring that "Italian costs had gone up 'beyond reason'" and that the "inability of his Italian partners to provide the lire they had promised for production caused the blowup of the 'Duchess' deal." Frankovich replied indirectly in the same venue some time later, noting that some American producers criticize Europeans "particularly because they were unable to make a deal in either production or distribution." Rudy Solmsen, another American producer operating along Frankovich's lines, contradicted Wanger directly and immediately, insisting that "contrary to Wanger's assertion, picture making in Rome is both thrifty and efficient. The only people who find it otherwise...are Americans who come in on a one-shot deal."

On September 6, presumably after getting the Olean offer, Wanger left for London, probably to find alternative British funding for the Italian costs and to pursue those production elements that were to be financed by frozen pounds. The growing uncertainty of his arrangements also prompted him now to postpone the start date by another three weeks to October 10.

On September 7, with a Scalera Studios connection now tentative, any pre-production activities requiring studio facilities were on hold. Hence James Wong Howe, who had

requested shooting tests of the Dupont raw stock, was idled. After a visit by the hotel doctor, who presumably declared Ophuls fit to leave his room, he may, in absence of any studio preparations have begun his meetings with Garbo on that day. As Hilde Ophuls recalled in her epilogue to *Spiel im Dasein*, "Max had had in Rome his first conversations with Garbo about her role and was again captivated by her." Those conversations were apparently lengthy and friendly enough to make them allies in their preference for making the film in Paris and their insistence on James Mason for the co-starring role.

Largely for different reasons, Ophuls' concern being primarily with the Scalera Studio hierarchy and the lack of time and funds for suitable pre-production design coordination and Garbo's with feeling hounded by the Italian press and public, Ophuls, Garbo, and, by association with her, Schlee were aligned on the issue of moving the production to France. Ophuls disapproved of Garbo's evasive tactics, telling Mason that "Garbo behaved in a rather exasperating manner," drawing attention to herself by her very attempts to avoid it, such as having an expensive car come to the rear of the hotel or wearing "umbrella-type" hats, but he also understood that the Italians were not treating her well. Commentators in the Italian film press admitted as much. In *Cinema*, Francesco Callari wrote that "with disappointment and a bit of shame, we must acknowledge that we behaved badly, very badly towards another famous guest: Greta Garbo [who] had to flee Italy because they made her life impossible." On September 7 or 8, another Italian journalist filed a





story, remarking on Ophuls' desire to leave: "Ophuls is reliably quoted as saying that, even if it was technically feasible to produce the film in Rome, he'd far prefer to shoot the 'Duchess' in Paris in the novel's original setting."

But when Wanger returned from London empty-handed, he persisted in his efforts to continue in Rome, attempting to negotiate for better terms with Dandi and Frankovich. When one key element of the Olean deal, Mason, withdrew as of midnight Thursday, September 8, California time (9 AM, September 9, in Rome), Wanger called him at 3:30 AM, California time, in a last ditch effort to persuade him otherwise. Mason described the conversation this way: "it was one of those terrible long distance calls in which half of the words don't register, you know a series of sort of —uh—machine gun conversations which consist of half the words, very difficult to understand. But what he was trying to say was, 'why aren't you here?'" And I was saying, what I was *trying* to say, was that my agent had said I mustn't go until the money was in escrow. But that had nothing to do with the picture, of course, with making or not making the picture." Wanger may not have known this then, but Ophuls certainly did and he shared that knowledge with Garbo. Once the conditions for production had been corrected, Mason was certain to rejoin the project.

The Olean Group was willing to compromise on casting, with Errol Flynn or Louis Jourdan being mentioned in that afternoon's negotiations. But Garbo refused to do so and kept pushing as well for shifting the production to Paris. Unable to get direct access to Garbo, for which he blamed Schlee in a draft for a telegram to Garbo's MCA agent, Roy Meyers—Schlee "has formed a barrier for direct contact," Wanger learned about her refusal from Frenke. But because of Ophuls' presence in Garbo's quarters for discussions of the script and her role, Wanger associated Ophuls with Schlee and Garbo and even Frenke: Schlee is "using Frenke and Opuls to obtain his ends," he charged in his telegram draft. Yet Ophuls agreed on little with Frenke, who wanted to go ahead with production in Rome, even under the Olean deal. Though, or perhaps because, he was, in Mason's words, "Garbo's West Coast Russian" (Schlee being her East Coast Russian) and had originally brought Garbo and the project to Wanger, who consequently expected him to "handle" her, Frenke opposed her choice of Ophuls and would soon start a persistent campaign against him, urging Wanger to replace him with William Dieterle or Charles Vidor. In that effort, Garbo's reaction to replacing Ophuls was his only caveat: "We should protect ourselves and be able to use him if we need him as far as Garbo is concerned. (I hope we don't need him.)," he wrote. That, as a frequent witness of the Ophuls-Garbo relationship, Frenke so feared Garbo's resistance to Ophuls' dismissal suggests he perceived them as solid allies. Perhaps Frenke's ranor toward Ophuls even derived from feeling displaced by him in Garbo's esteem.

With Mason out for all present purposes and Garbo refusing to consider anyone else, Wanger had no further room to maneuver in his negotiations with the Olean Group. He threw in the towel Friday evening, acceding to Garbo and Ophuls'



wish to shift production to Paris. He even briefly considered giving up his independent operation, offering to let RKO take over the production in Paris with him as a unit producer.

On Saturday, September 10, the Wangers flew to Paris; Garbo and Schlee followed by car the same day. One can only wonder why the Ophulses chose to linger in Rome that day and Sunday. But there is little doubt that the feared event eliciting gallows humor Ophuls was alluding to when he scribbled "Rome at the time of Galgenhumor [gallows humor]" on his hotel bill before leaving by train on Monday morning was not so much the ultimate collapse of Wanger's European enterprise as having to get ready for production at Scalera with Frenke and Frankovich, the threat of which had persisted until late on Friday.

During Wanger's stay in Paris that fall, *Joan of Arc's* excel-





Greta Garbo in Rome, 1949

lent performance in European Catholic countries appeared to be changing his fortunes. With that, his ambitions for *Duchess* rose. He now saw it as a prestige vehicle, destined to further raise his European reputation when it was to be released during the 1950 centenary of Balzac's death. Consequently, he supported Ophuls' always more ambitious conception of the project. It was that unmade film Ophuls mourned.

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A German version of this article appeared in *FilmExil* 15/2002. We thank Wolfgang Jacobsen of the German Filmmuseum for giving permission to publish it here.

#### NOTES

1. Max Ophuls, *Spiel im Dasein, Eine Rückblende* (Stuttgart : Henry Goverts Verlag, 1959), 230.
2. In a much less detailed version, this article was originally part of a chapter written for and then excised from my "Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios" (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996). After additional research in Rome in 2001, I revised and expanded it for publication in translation in the Max Ophuls centenary special issue of the German Filmmuseum's *FilmExil* (#15, April 2002). This first publication in the original English is slightly revised.
3. All correspondence, contracts, budgets, scripts, and other production-related documents quoted or otherwise used for writing this article are part of the Walter F. Wanger Collection, located at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison.
4. Author's interview of James Mason, April 5 and 24, 1979.
5. Based on news stories in *Il Messagero*, *Il Tempo*, and *La Nuova Stampa*.
6. Based on news stories in the American and Italian motion picture trade press, such as *Variety* and *Cinema N.S.*
7. Background information on "Mike Frankovich" is derived from *Variety* news stories.



**"Do I disgust you?"**



*La Pianiste*: the washroom scene.



# Or, Tirez pas sur *La Pianiste*

by Robin Wood

Michael Haneke's latest film has received, to say the least, a mixed reception, both from critics and from audiences. Its *Grand Prix* at Cannes (plus the awards to its two leading actors) must be seen as something of an act of courage on the part of the jury. Many have found the film disgusting and/or ridiculous; in my own experience, since its release it has provoked derisive or embarrassed laughter from numerous spectators unable to accept the alleged excesses of (especially) its later developments. It's true of course that Erika/Isabelle Huppert, like Hitchcock's Marnie, whom in certain respects she resembles, represents an extreme case, yet her problems with sexuality are deeply rooted within (indeed, are the product of) the fundamental contradictions of our culture. Who, within our civilization, can claim to be sexually healthy, and what exactly would this mean?—a 'perfect' traditional monogamous marriage-and-family?—the celebration of total sexual freedom/promiscuity?—the unashamed enjoyment of pornography?—strict heterosexuality?—perfectly balanced bisexuality?—the freedom from traditional constraints that characterizes much of 'queer' culture? All of these have their 'pulls', and they pull in many directions. *La Pianiste* might be described as the story of a woman caught between the opposite extremes.

Haneke, of course, has always divided viewers; he sets out to make films that challenge and provoke, insist upon (and invariably get) strong reactions. *The Seventh Continent* and *Benny's Video* both gained passionate defenders, but many thought the films went too far, were too concerned with 'extreme' cases (did Haneke really endorse family suicide, did he really believe teenagers would commit casual murder because they watched violent videos?). And *Funny Games*, it must be admitted, with its apparently gratuitous sadism, gave the attackers the ammunition they wanted: the film's undeniable power to disturb was not justified by any comparable depth of significance or balanced by any sense of how its horrors might be remedied.

A more intelligent doubt has been expressed to me by Michael Tapper, the illustrious editor of the Swedish magazine *Filmhäftet* in which this article first appeared (in translation): Haneke's analysis of contemporary western civilization is devastatingly accurate, but he offers no way forward, so that the films can be read as strongly conservative and reactionary, demanding a return to the values of the past. My own feeling is that Haneke is certainly intelligent enough to be aware that it is precisely the past that has produced our present and that in any case returning is impossible, and I think *La Pianiste* provides convincing confirmation of this. One cannot say—and has no right to expect—that Haneke provides answers to the contemporary sickness: no one else has any, so why should he? What he *can*, and does, do is throw an extraordinarily vivid and searching light on certain major aspects of western culture's progressive deterioration, and he does so in a way that demands response.

Erika's behavior (which seems to me, given the data with which Haneke provides us, absolutely logical, step by step) can in fact only be understood within the context of our sexual history over the past hundred years, our 'progress' from neurosis-breeding repression to what some have hopefully regarded as sexual liberation, which has proven, in practice, to be simply another form of imprisonment. The question as to whether a figure as grotesquely repressive as Erika's mother could still exist in today's world seems to me immaterial: we can argue that Haneke is claiming the right to a certain artistic licence in order to juxtapose our sexual past with our sexual present, in order to show them in the starkest light as at once opposites and complements, the former inevitably producing the latter. My own response to the film (it is my duty to confess frankly) has been highly personal: I identify with Erika totally. True, I have never done the things she does or wanted those that she (for the film's first three-quarters) believes she wants, but I perfectly understand and empathize with her predicament. I was born in 1931 and my parents, both then well into their forties, were, in their attitudes to sex and sexual morality, archetypal Victorians, which is to say that they maintained a total silence on the subject. In those days, in middle-class bourgeois circles, the word sex as we use it today didn't exist, it was used only to distinguish between men and women, never to refer to any specific physical activity. I didn't learn even the basic 'facts of



life' until I was twelve, and barely understood them even then, the talk in which they were explained to me (by the headmaster of my all-boys' school) being delivered in halting, mumbled speech, with perceptibly trembling hands and a refusal to meet my eyes. Obviously, sex was so disgusting that decent people could only be appalled by its unfortunate necessity in reproducing the human race, and to enjoy it must be the worst kind of sin.

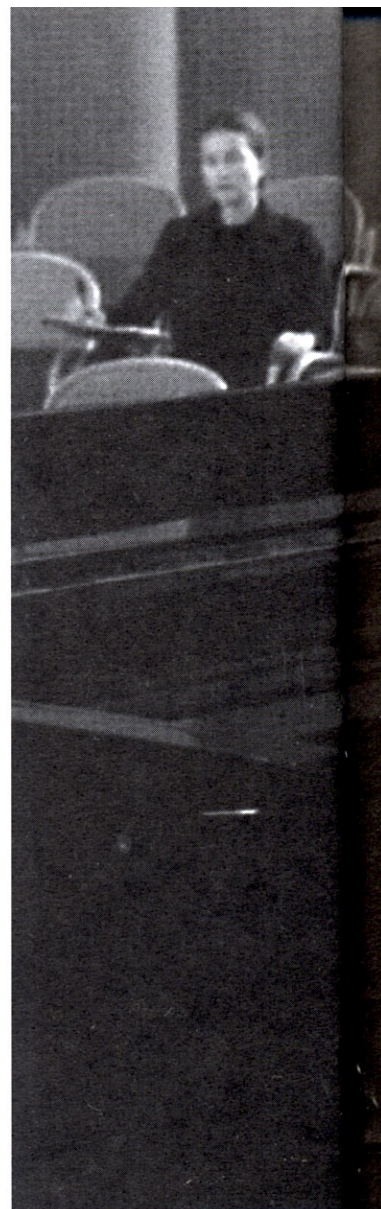
So, when the floodgates opened (as they inevitably must), we had 'liberation'. Since I finally managed to accept myself as gay, at the age of thirty-nine, I have lived an active sex life, but I've never felt 'liberated' exactly, and I don't believe that I live within a liberated culture. People now talk about sex all the time, quite openly, but there lingers on the sense that it is somehow daring, somewhat shocking even, to do so, a self-conscious displaying of one's emancipation, the self-consciousness betraying the unacknowledged legacy of guilt. In a truly liberated culture sexual activity would be as natural as eating and drinking: we wouldn't have to talk about it all the time, any more than we feel a need to tell our friends what we had for breakfast. And although it seems unlikely that many people today preserve strict monogamy, its ghost lingers on, manifested in guilt feelings, in jealousy, in anger at the discovery of 'cheating', in the secrecy and furtiveness of 'infidelity'. The rationale for monogamy (surely by now thoroughly discredited) was based purely on the supposed sanctity of the patriarchal line, on the husband's need for assurance that his sons were indeed his—hence the necessity for convincing women that they mustn't enjoy sex, they must just 'lie on their backs and think of England' (or, presumably, Sweden, France, Austria...). Monogamy, in other words, was essentially an institution for the subordination of women; Victorian men were officially supposed to be monogamous, but few really thought it mattered.

A major manifestation of our non-liberation is the way in which sex has been commercialized: given the obsessive nature of our fascination with it, it can sell practically anything, but above all itself. A film promoted as containing sexually explicit material will automatically find an audience, irrespective of its value either as art or entertainment, yet in cinema (whether 'mainstream' or 'arthouse') we are still never permitted more than a quick glimpse of genitalia, especially of male genitalia, if indeed we get that: the reticence perpetuates the sense that sex is still (in D.H. Lawrence's famous phrase) 'the dirty little secret', even as it appears to offer us the satisfaction we are supposed to desire. I assume that Haneke, in *La Pianiste*, would have liked to show us everything, since one of the film's central projects is clearly the demystification of sex. In a healthy sexual climate, full-frontal nudity (of both genders) and actual intercourse would be shown in movies as a matter of course—not as the latest form of titillation, but as casually as scenes of people eating their dinners. We need to see Isabelle Huppert actually sucking Benoit Magimel's cock, not because it would give us our latest thrill but because it is an intrinsic part of the scene, and to conceal it is to continue the repression that is the mere obverse of our 'liberation'. (I am not of course blaming Haneke for this limitation: he presumably wanted his film to

be shown in more than porn theatre peep-shows, where it would not in any case have greatly titillated or satisfied the customers).

Which brings us, logically and inevitably, to the other side of Erika's sexual education, hardcore pornography. I don't know whether I am the best or the least well-equipped to discuss this topic (but I shall discuss it anyway). I appear to be one of those strange people who are totally immune to its siren allurements. I have watched a fair amount of gay porn and some straight, and have never felt anything but boredom—never even the faintest stirrings of an erection. I can see, objectively, that even hardcore gay porn has its auteurs, notably Jean-Daniel Cadinot, whose films even rise to minimal plots and minimal characterization before the action starts. The general run of 'industrial' porn, however, appears to me an object lesson in alienation, both the actors' (if one can call them that—they perform acts) and my own. My peculiarity is that I am not especially interested in sex per se. I don't think in terms of 'having sex' (a common expression today) but in terms of 'making love', which of course includes sex, in whatever form the participants (there could be several—I am very attracted

to the pleasures of group sex) enjoy, but which does not preclude (is in fact based upon) affection, tenderness, respect, mutuality. This distinction operates for me even in experiences of casual intercourse in a bathhouse: I need to feel something for my partner as a person, even if I only met him three minutes ago, some intuitive sense of him as a human being, whether he is young and beautiful or old and fat, for what matters is human contact, not beautiful bodies or even 'performance'. I have not infrequently had the experience of being merely 'used' to perform certain tasks, after which, silence and exit quickly. In the overwhelming majority of the gay porn films I have sat through, the men are just bodies; in many cases they don't even bother to suggest that they are enjoying themselves, they just perform certain acts, with blank faces. You can't carry alienation further than that: the alienation of the emotions from the body, the alienation of sexual pleasure from love and affection, the alienation of the spectator from the performance: what many, today, have been taught to want. Paid sex, in which one human being constructs him/herself as the object, and may even undergo the further humiliation of having to act pleasure for the enjoyment of the customer, is merely another version of this, endemic to a cul-







Erika/Isabelle Huppert (extreme left) listens to Walter (Benoit Magimel) at his audition.

ture in which power = money. 'Getting sex' has become a common expression, like buying cans of beans in a supermarket.

The notion of alienated sex leads us directly into Erika's preferred territory, sado-masochism. It is, people tell me, 'only a game', but surely our games, how we play them, the kinds of satisfaction we get from them, can tell us a lot about the realities of our culture, the types of relationship that it produces and encourages. The satisfactions of s/m are, presumably, the sensation of power and the sensation of powerlessness, the satisfaction of punishing and the satisfaction of being punished. In other words, it's all about power and domination, the very structures of capitalist culture, pervading and corrupting all relationships within it, from the family to the workplace, from parents/children to employer/employees, and then outwards to global politics, President Bush's evident desire that America (and himself) should dominate the entire world. Why would we invent, and presumably enjoy, games in which we hurt (or pretend to hurt) other people, or in which we enjoy being hurt, being the 'slave' to a 'master'? Even exchanging roles midway (as I am told practitioners often do) scarcely alters the fundamental unpleasantness of such 'games'. And surely the fact that people perform s/m because it 'turns them on' casts

doubt on its status as 'just play'? If you can't 'get it up' unless you feel you are in a position of power over someone who is (if even momentarily) disempowered, is not something seriously wrong? It is all as far removed as possible from the beautiful reciprocities of 'making love', which can of course be as gentle and tender or as passionate and violent as the participants desire—so long as they both, or all, desire it. But s/m, as I understand it from certain videos, is seldom passionate—rather, it is deliberate, detached and coldblooded.

I should add here, parenthetically, that in writing these things I am not trying to instil guilt feelings in individuals (though I would like to promote a certain awareness of the meaning of what they are doing). I do not wish, that is, to spoil people's fun. Within the culture, many probably require hardcore pornography and/or s/m as a necessary release from their tensions and frustrations, especially if they are barred (for reasons either psychological or situational, e.g. living in a supposedly monogamous relationship), in a culture where true sexual freedom continues to be very rare, from the fully reciprocal pleasures of 'making love' freely. The individual (even, I suppose, that most heinous of all criminals the child-abuser, the ultimate exponent of power/powerlessness, though cer-



tainly he must be stopped, as he is seriously harming innocent human beings) cannot be personally blamed for what is, at root, a fundamental sickness of the entire culture. If we lived in a culture based upon the ideals of full equality, on cooperation rather than domination, would s/m continue to be practised, or would it simply fade away?

*La Pianiste* brilliantly encapsulates the history of human sexuality over the past hundred years by showing a woman totally governed by the extremes and their brutal clash, knowing nothing in between. If one takes its full implications, it is a profound indictment of our sexual past and our sexual present, and the enormous toll it has taken on our humanity. And, as sexuality (like eating and drinking) is so central, so basic, to our existence, this has repercussions in the world beyond sex—into our relationships, into our social/political existence, into our sense of a possible future (if we have one, with the twin 'Swords of Damocles' hanging over our heads, nuclear war and global warming, both, as things stand, to be determined by the currently all-powerful United States of America).

### **Erika's Progress (1)**

Erika is trapped between the Scylla and Charybdis of twentieth century sexuality, and, unlike Odysseus, she has no benign goddess on hand to help her slip through. The opening scene establishes at once, in the most direct and brutal way, the repressiveness of her upbringing: a woman apparently in her late 30s/early 40s confronted (when she arrives home an hour

later than expected) by a mother who demands to know exactly where she has been, what she has been doing, why she has bought herself a new dress. The confrontation swiftly erupts into physical violence, the mother only pacified when her daughter has been reduced to tears, which enables her to begin all over again a few moments later. We may subsequently deduce that the mother has her reasons (for what they are worth): the probability is that Erika has spent her extra hour (as we see her do later) in a booth watching hardcore pornography and sniffing the discarded tissues of the male customers. The mother/daughter relationship itself has strong s/m overtones ('I should cut your hands off, beating your own mother'): the foundations of Erika's grotesque fantasies are already there in the child's earliest erotic relationship. It is quite unthinkable that this woman has ever instructed her daughter in sex, though she has clearly instructed her *against* it, probably without ever letting her know what exactly it is. We may also assume (Haneke does not have to tell us) that Erika, on the verge of middle-age, is still a virgin.

This, then, constitutes one half of Erika's understanding of sexuality; the other half is apparently derived entirely from her experience of hardcore pornography, bolstered by occasional visits to drive-ins to spy on couples uncomfortably copulating on the back seats of cars (in our 'liberated' society they can't do it at home in bed). She has nothing in between. Her commitment to s/m (which appears total and unquestioning, as if she believed, with her upbringing quite logically, that this is what





sex is all about) is the logical consequence of this dichotomy (she will also have encountered it in her forays into porn theatres): alienated sex devoid of affection and tenderness, coupled with the 'knowledge' that all sex is wicked and disgusting and must therefore be punished mercilessly. Hence her necessity to punish herself: the complex motivation for the scene in which she mutilates herself in the bathtub is established in the series of sequences that precede it, her evident (authentic, healthy) attraction to Walter as he performs Schubert (clearly for her), her punishment of him (for arousing her) by voting against him at the auditions. In her relationship with Walter she will learn what punishment really is and will be chastised, brutally, out of her fantasies and obsessions, ready (perhaps) at the end of the film to begin living.

I find Haneke's understanding (and acceptance) of Erika very moving; her question 'Do I disgust you?', addressed diegetically to Walter, is also clearly addressed to the audience, as direct challenge. Were I disgusted by Erika I would have also to be disgusted with myself (which in fact I have been often, and sometimes still am). Yes, she represents an extreme case. But can any of us, living as we do in a still oppressive culture, dissociate ourselves from her cleanly? She is, in extreme forms, both our past and our present. So what is to be our future? And what is to be hers, after the film ends?

### Winterreise

One can understand *La Pianiste* without access to *Winterreise*, but one cannot understand it completely: Haneke, presumably, does not expect everyone in his audience to be familiar with Schubert's ever-astonishing song cycle (although it is one of the essential landmarks of our cultural history—but do we even have a shared cultural history any more?), any more than he can have expected his audience to identify (in a crucial scene in *The Seventh Continent*) Alban Berg's violin concerto (dedicated 'To the memory of an angel') or its quotation from Bach. But he is, in my opinion, absolutely justified in suggesting that we *should* have a cultural past even if we haven't, within a present that, at virtually every moment of our waking lives, demands that we think only of today and 'the latest', 'the newest', 'the trendiest', the 'hottest', or we shall not be 'with it' (and what a disaster *that* would be; poor me—I know I am not 'with it' and I feel so left out). *Winterreise* (and specifically the song that Erika rehearses, separately, with the male singer and his female accompanist) adds a whole new dimension to the film with its extraordinary insights into the process and experience of alienation, hitherto (as far as I know) unrecognized by any reviewer. I happen to know the work rather well (I own sixteen recordings of it) and would like to convey what I can of its significance in the film for those unfamiliar with its profoundly disturbing pleasures. (Whoever did the English subtitles for the DVD should surely have realized that the texts form an integral part of the film's meaning and should have been translated).

The song cycle consists of settings of twenty-four not especially distinguished poems by Wilhelm Müller, which divide into three groups of eight; the singer (it is a debut performance, and he is one among a number of young participating

musicians, in a kind of graduation concert) is apparently offering the last eight. The cycle haunts the entire film, an essential aspect of its structure. It is the first of the eight songs (No. 17, *Im Dorfe*, 'In the Village') that we watch Erika rehearsing with (alternately) her protégé and protégée, and it is the only song we hear at length, though we are also at one point given the first lines of the next (*Der sturmische Morgen*, 'The Stormy Morning'). It seems valid, however, to refer viewers also to the very first and very last songs of the entire cycle, even though they are not heard in the film: they sum up the progress of Schubert's extraordinary work. Superficially, the cycle of poems consists of the self-pitying outpourings of a young man whose sweetheart has jilted him (her parents have chosen a rich husband for her), a theme typical of 19th century romanticism. Schubert, however, in his setting brings out the poems' subtext so that it becomes dominant: the song cycle is about the protagonist's progress into 'alienation', a useful term because it carries the two relevant meanings of 'estrangement from society' and 'madness'. The opening lines of the first song introduce this theme immediately and could be taken as summing up Erika's situation: '*Fremd bin ich eingezogen, Fremd zieh ich wieder aus*' ('I was a stranger when I arrived, a stranger now I'm leaving'). By the time we have accompanied the wanderer to the last song and the final outcome, the progression into alienation is complete: he identifies himself (and proposes to travel) with a crazed organ-grinder (*Der Leiermann*) who plays his instrument on the ice *outside* the village, where '*...sein kleine Teller/Bleibt ihm immer leer*' ('...his little plate remains always empty'), where '*Keiner mag ihn hören, Keiner sieht ihn an*' ('No one wants to hear him, no one looks at him'), his only companions the dogs that growl at him. This also, I shall argue, has its elliptical, arguably negative, relevance to the Erika of the film's end.

The rehearsals for *Im Dorfe* are a feature of the film's very structure: its second scene (after the pre-credit battle with the mother, and introduced by the film's title) opens with an overhead shot (a motif to be repeated later) of Erika's hands on the keyboard as she instructs the unfortunate young accompanist in the interpretation, and the film ends at the moment when we know that the same notes will *not* be played because there is no accompanist left to play them. The song is the most explicit of the entire cycle about the protagonist's alienation (not, at this stage, madness) from bourgeois society. He has entered a village at night; the good citizens are asleep, lost in dreams, as their watchdogs guard them, barking at the traveller and rattling their chains. Schubert's startlingly odd and original accompaniment eerily suggests these sounds while providing an undercurrent of profound disturbance. The sleeping bourgeois represent 'normality' (from which the traveller, like Erika, is excluded). We should be careful to avoid the cultural trap of automatically using the term as if it were a known positive. 'Normality' means, strictly, 'conforming to the dominant norms of the culture'. If a culture is sick at its roots, then 'normality' will be simply the manifestation of that sickness. (Erika's mother would certainly describe herself as 'normal'). The song is absolutely clear about this: the 'normal' people have 'normal' dreams, and the dreams are illusory, a brief



respite from the banality of their daily lives; when they wake up, they will merely long to return to sleep and dream some more. The traveller himself is not immune, for a moment he envies the sleepers the normality in which (like Erika) he knows he can never participate.

Haneke makes it clear that Erika understands the song far better than the (somewhat supercilious, self-satisfied) male singer she is accompanying. He, with his petty, limited ambitions and his spontaneous eruption of cruelty when they are threatened (his rage at his vulnerable young accompanist when she arrives late for the student performance, in tears and suffering from obviously nervous diarrhoea) is 'normal', as a male in contemporary culture. But Erika has access to all the turmoil and confusion that underlie and discredit 'normality' and refuses to be lulled into its deceiving dreams. The song's last two lines express this perfectly: '*Ich bin zu Ende mit allen Traumen-/Was will ich unter den Schlafenden saumen?*' ('I am at the end of all dreams, why should I linger amongst the sleepers?'). The next song (*Der sturmische Morgen*/'The Stormy Morning', of which we hear the first two lines) welcomes 'natural' turmoil, after the 'normality' of illusory dreams has been rejected.

Erika talks of the 'madness' of her two favourite composers, Schumann and Schubert, which, in Schubert's case, is stretching things a bit. His 'madness', such as it was, was the end result, not of psychological disorder, but of syphilis, aside from which he appears to have been, psychically and sexually, quite unusually healthy: by all accounts he led a very active and uninhibited sex life, and there is considerable support for the belief that he was bisexual. If there is a positive 'image' of psychic health in the film it is an aural one: Schubert's music (the slow movement and scherzo of his great A major sonata, D.959, also figure prominently). But her identification with these composers is clear (she has a portrait of Schumann, who did indeed become insane through stretches of his later years, in her practice/teaching room). She knows, in other words, that she is gradually going mad, and that this is her destiny, and when she talks (at the private recital) of Adorno's writings on Schumann's 'twilight' (he *knew* he was losing his mind) she is clearly talking about herself. Until she falls in love with Walter—and until she discovers the appalling mistakes she has made in trying to relate to him—she appears to accept this unquestioningly. She doesn't even sense that there might be alternatives.

### **Erika's Progress (2)**

I am somewhat puzzled by J. Hoberman's treatment of Schubert in his review of the film in *The Village Voice: The Piano Teacher* (the misleading English-language title, Haneke's original insisting, significantly, on her personal musicianship, her commitment to music) 'parodies the idea of classical music as the ultimate cultural expression—the application of intelligence, technique, and discipline to the sublimation of passion'. Perhaps this is true of 'the cool appraisal with which Erika reduces her students to tears', but this is surely countered by her commitment (outside her lessons, and her treatment of her students) to music itself. It is through the medium of music (specifically Schubert) that Erika and Walter fall in love, and the film is

absolutely clear on this in the 'twinning' of the two crucial sequences during the piano recital in the private apartment. First, Walter watches Erika perform in a Bach duet; between comes a conversation between them, after which, for his contribution to the performance, he substitutes Schubert for Schönberg (being already aware of her emotional commitment to the former). In the first sequence Haneke cuts between her performance and closeups of his reactions; the second gives us *his* performance, intercut with closeups of *her* reactions. It is very clearly a love scene, and the mutual experience of music is central to it: Schubert as matchmaker. No one could mistake it simply for the usual 'attraction to a pretty face' scenario. The 'alienation' the film attacks is never classical music itself but the improper uses to which it is put. This is clear in the paralleling of the two ambitious mothers, Erika's and the young apprentice accompanist's: the mother's total inability to make contact with the emotional/intellectual complexities of great music is made abundantly clear in her evident boredom during the private recital. Her insistent driving of her daughter has nothing to do with the appreciation of music, which is merely for the mother a means to a successful career. This is echoed very precisely in the attitude of the other mother.

Faced (in the washroom scene) with, at last, the possibility of actually making love, Erika can only fall back, automatically, on what she has learnt: alienated sex followed by its punishment, bringing Walter to the point of orgasm then denying him satisfaction, whilst refusing him any pleasure of reciprocation, the Master of the Slave, and above all turning aside any possibility of mutuality, tenderness or affection. Schubert is completely forgotten, an incompatible aspect of her fragmented existence. This is answered by the scene in the bedroom of her apartment, the room barricaded, the mother listening and aware that something 'dirty' is going on (a necessary component, I think, for Erika, a kind of intuitive and grotesque revenge for oppression by someone who is thoroughly oppressed and, on some level, vaguely aware of it). Here, to avert the threat of actual intercourse (not only sexual, but also emotional), Erika produces her letter, with prolonged and highly detailed instructions as to exactly what Walter is to perform: a kind of s/m nightmare from which Erika would be lucky to escape alive (which perhaps is exactly the fate she wishes to avoid): she is to be tied up, beaten, slapped, punched in the stomach... Nice, beautiful, 'normal' Walter can only laugh and reject the entire project, without the least qualms as to how deeply this rejection might affect the woman he believes himself in love with. All his tenderness evaporates, proving that it was largely self-serving. 'Normality', because it has such a narrow vision and such high standards, can react only with disdainful and superior amusement. The film's presentation and development of Walter should, I think, assuage any qualms we might have about Haneke's position. This upstanding, admirable and admired, handsome, and above all 'normal' young man emerges subsequently as the film's nearest approach to a villain. I find it so admirable that Erika's 'Do I disgust you?' is directed both to him and to the audience, many of whose members will by now be grabbing enthusiastically on to him as their identification figure. His subsequent



exposure as an all-too-'normal' masculinist brute, woman beater and rapist, is their salutary punishment.

Yet it is this experience that begins the process (which we imagine, I think, continuing beyond the end of the film) of Erika's release: his reading aloud of her letter, and his contemptuous reaction to it, reveal to her the absurdity of her acquired desires, together with a necessary glimpse of 'normality'. For Haneke has, I think, the awareness that the 'normality' constructed by bourgeois capitalist society has certain basic elements in common with a deeper normality, rooted in fundamental physical realities that transcend the necessary props of our debased culture. When Erika confronts him again at the skating rink and he takes her into a changing-room, she is ready to learn, to let him guide her; he reacts with an act of oral sex so brutal that she throws up. This is her initiation into 'normal' sexuality, his 'normal' reaction being to experience her inability as an affront to his male pride. When he subsequently beats and rapes her in her apartment, it is her punishment for that affront. One of the film's many brilliant insights is its revelation that the 'normal' person is capable of a brutality and insensitivity far uglier than the fantasies of the sick.

Walter's charm, his seemingly open boyish tenderness, was called into question much earlier in the film. Erika commits her own unpardonable act (putting broken glass in her young pupil's coat pocket) because she has seen Walter (the girl's page-turner for the performance of *Winterreise*) comforting her and is jealous. But Walter is also aware that Erika has seen him, and he therefore understands at once that she is the guilty person. His reaction is not horror but a sudden joy as culpable as Erika's action: he is thrilled that she has performed this atrocious deed for *him*, it is the evidence he wants of her love. Hence he immediately follows her to the washroom, in the expectation of passionate lovemaking.

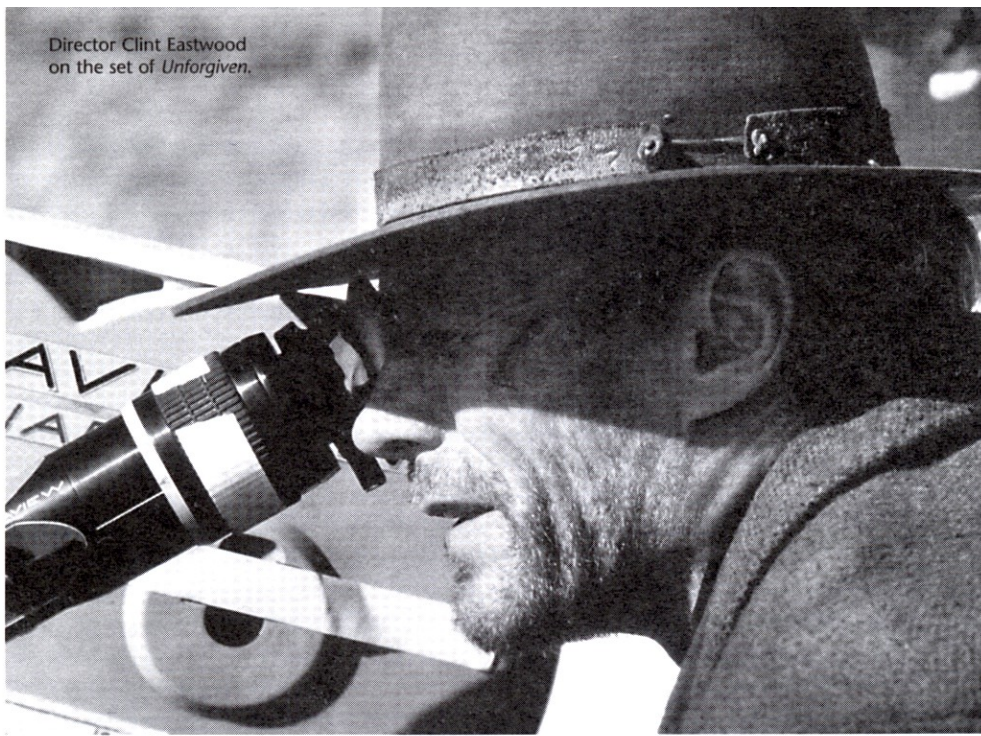
Erika's progress demands, finally, a retreat—a return to the infant's very first erotic attachment, to the mother, with whom she attempts to make passionate love. It is not, of course, a success, but we can see the attempt as necessary to a new beginning. She has been shown the absurdity of her demands for sex-as-punishment, she has gone to Walter to discover what it should really be like, she has been 'rewarded' with a brutal beating and rape, a hideously ironic version of the punishment she has always sought. But, as with Marnie ('Marnie, you're achin' ma leg'), the mother's ambiguous rejection (the scene actually ends in a kind of passive acceptance of Erika's physical closeness, but without reciprocation) is the crucial determinant. Erika has no Mark to stroke her hair, and at the film's end she is on her own. But we have the sense of a clean slate—the sense that she must now choose her future, which (after all she has gone through) could take the form of a search for sexual health or a renunciation of sex altogether.

So where exactly is Erika at the film's end? Haneke (intelligently I think) declines to give us a definite answer. Since the 60s the closure of Classical Hollywood—the traditional 'happy end' or the much less common tragic one—has become increasingly impossible or implausible. We are not certain what future lies ahead for the lovers in their tentative reconciliation at the end of *L'Avventura*, or for Antoine Doinel when

he turns back from the sea at the end of *Les quatre cents coups*. There are signs that this openness is becoming today even more pronounced, with endings that leave us with evidence that is actually contradictory: Francois Ozon's *Sous le Sable* is one striking example, *La Pianiste* is another. What exactly does Erika intend, when she takes the knife to the concert hall, revenge or protest?—to stab Walter in public?—to stab herself to death in front of him? We are surely meant to be uncertain, the point being that she probably doesn't know herself. In the foyer, three things happen: Erika's mother meets, for the first time, her counterpart, the mother of the female accompanist; there is a hint that the damage to the girl's hand may be less serious than was initially assumed, with the possibility that she may, after all, be able to play again professionally; and Walter goes by with a group of friends, his usual cheerful, uncaring self. The two mothers have been linked earlier in the film, by their attitude to their daughters (putting their ambition for their careers above any thought of their psychic welfare) and by an actual dialogue echo (Erika's mother's exclamation of 'I should cut your hands off', the other mother's response to her daughter's injury, that the 'man' who did it 'deserves to have his hands cut off'). The meeting of the two women here, in Erika's presence, stands (coming as it does shortly after her attempt at physical, erotic contact with her mother) as a reminder that from now on she must be self-reliant (she moves away, leaving the women to go into the concert together). Similarly, her glimpse of Walter's carefree manner, together with his casual greeting, seems finally to distance her from him, so that she is able simply to leave him to get on with his own life. When, left alone, she inflicts the injury on herself (carefully stabbing *above* the heart, and not too deep), she may be administering self-punishment (for what she did to the girl, for her past mistakes with Walter) to the extent that she now feels she deserves. Richard Lippe has suggested an alternative reading here that I find increasingly persuasive: she is severing a nerve or muscle connecting to her hand, so that she will never play in public again. She is not of course renouncing Schubert and all his music has come to mean in the course of the film. The act is rather a gesture of protest against what our culture has made of it: the degradation of music into the means to a career: by the young male singer (she was to have accompanied his performance of *Winterreise*, replacing the injured student), but above all by the two mothers: the perversion of art's potential for liberation and freedom into yet another form of oppression and domination by people who, raised in a society where nothing matters but material success, are quite incapable of understanding it. Haneke, I think, wants us to be uncertain of these things, allowing us no more than hints about her motivation. What is quite clear is that she is now able to walk away—from Walter, from her mother, and above all perhaps from the implications of *Winterreise's* ultimate movement into alienation. She will never be 'normal', but she has acquired the strength to reject the total alienation (and potential insanity) of Schubert's traveller in the final song. We need not, I think, feel too sorry for the ambitious young singer, who will be deprived of his long-awaited public performance.



Director Clint Eastwood  
on the set of *Unforgiven*.



## Icons and Subversion in the Westerns of Clint Eastwood

by Peter E.S. Babiak

Clint Eastwood's star image—the figure of the Gunslinger called “The Man With No Name”—is rooted in the Western genre. Although later broadened to that of the man of violent vigilante action (by films such as the “Dirty Harry” series), the Gunslinger persona established by television's *Rawhide* and Sergio Leone's famous “Spaghetti Western Trilogy” represents the core of Eastwood's star image. Mainstream Hollywood Cinema tends to be inherently conservative, addressing social issues on a mythological level in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the dominant social order (patriarchal capitalism) and its establishment. Eastwood's Gunslinger persona represents a specific cultural icon in that mythology. However, in the four Westerns that Eastwood both directs and stars in—*High Plains Drifter* (1972), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Pale Rider* (1985), and *Unforgiven* (1992)—the Gunslinger persona (which represents social instability) is consistently conflated with another easily recognized persona that is an agent of social stability. Eastwood manipulates the Gunslinger persona in this way as part of a revisionist agenda; he questions the legitimacy of the establishment of the dominant social order by dramatizing the impact of this process on those who are marginalized/ silenced upon its completion.

The character that Eastwood portrays in each of his four Westerns is always initially identified with social stability, adopting the Gunslinger persona only in reaction to an initiating act of violence. The initiating act of violence in each of these Westerns reaffirms or entrenches the dominant social order and is usually sadistic. This arbitrary affirmation of the dominant social order spurs one of the film's characters to question the validity of the entire social system, in a manner aligned with the supernatural. This act of defiance precipitates a reincarnation of Eastwood's character who is reconstituted to represent a conflation of opposing iconic values. The Gunslinger persona (representing the dark, violent, socially unstable side of Classical Western mythology) is conflated with a persona (Town Marshall, Settler, Preacher, loving father and husband) who represents the peaceful side of Classical Western mythology that is associated with social stability. Eastwood then usually dramatizes the Gunslinger's redress of the initiating act of violence, facilitating the protection/removal of those marginalized. The dominant social order is then practically and ideologically dismantled by the Gunslinger.



Unlike Classical Westerns, Eastwood's Westerns are generally concerned with the disruption of the dominant social order, not its' foundation. Eastwood therefore distinguishes himself as one of the handful of American filmmakers who manages to maintain consistent commercial success while also consistently maintaining a critical stance in relation to patriarchal capitalism. Eastwood does this by structuring his films on many levels. In terms of their generic form, all four of the films to be discussed here are easily identifiable as Westerns in the tradition of John Ford or Sergio Leone (as opposed to the films of Michael Cimino or Arthur Penn). In terms of their narrative structure all four of the films are easily recognizable as falling into traditional categories—*High Plains Drifter* and *Unforgiven* are structured according to vengeance plots, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is structured as a picaresque quest story, and *Pale Rider* is structured as a foundation myth. By utilizing easily recognizable generic forms and narrative structures, Eastwood guarantees the accessibility of these films to a popular audience. Eastwood further guarantees this accessibility by presenting his critique of patriarchal capitalism in a manner consistent with the popular social discourse of the period in which the films were released.

The following is a brief discussion of how Eastwood manipulates recognizable icons and narrative structures associated with mainstream Hollywood Cinema in order to produce meaning effects subversive the dominant ideology.

#### ***High Plains Drifter***

Although *High Plains Drifter* begins with the arrival of the Drifter/Clint Eastwood into the town of Lago, everything dramatized in the film is precipitated by the murder of Marshall Jim Duncan/Buddy Van Horn. The murder is presented twice in the course of film, once as a flashback from the Drifter's perspective, and once as a flashback from Mordecai's/Billy Curtis' perspective. Duncan had planned to report that the mine (the economic base of the community) was located on government property, and refused all attempts to bribe him into silence. The members of the town council all have a financial interest in the mine, and hire Stacey Bridges/Geoffrey Lewis and his gang to murder Duncan. The entire town watches the murder ignoring Duncan's pleas for their help, as Duncan's murderers take pleasure in his pain and torment while flogging him to death. We learn that the Bridges gang later becomes difficult to control, and its members are imprisoned on the basis of false evidence planted by the mining company. The legal system of Lago serves the financial interests of the community and functions without relation to any objective sense of justice or morality.

As Duncan dies he gasps "Damn you all to hell". Later, the Drifter paints the town red and renames it "Hell", connecting the Drifter to Duncan's curse. (The Drifter is also startled by the sound of the stagecoach driver cracking a whip as he enters Lago, further reinforcing the connection of the Drifter to the murder of Duncan). The Drifter has supernatural abilities; he is shot at by Callie/Mariana Hill at close range while in the bathtub but emerges unhurt, and is able to see behind himself without turning his head (the Stableman/Chuck Waters attempts to stab the Drifter from behind, and is told "You



*The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976)



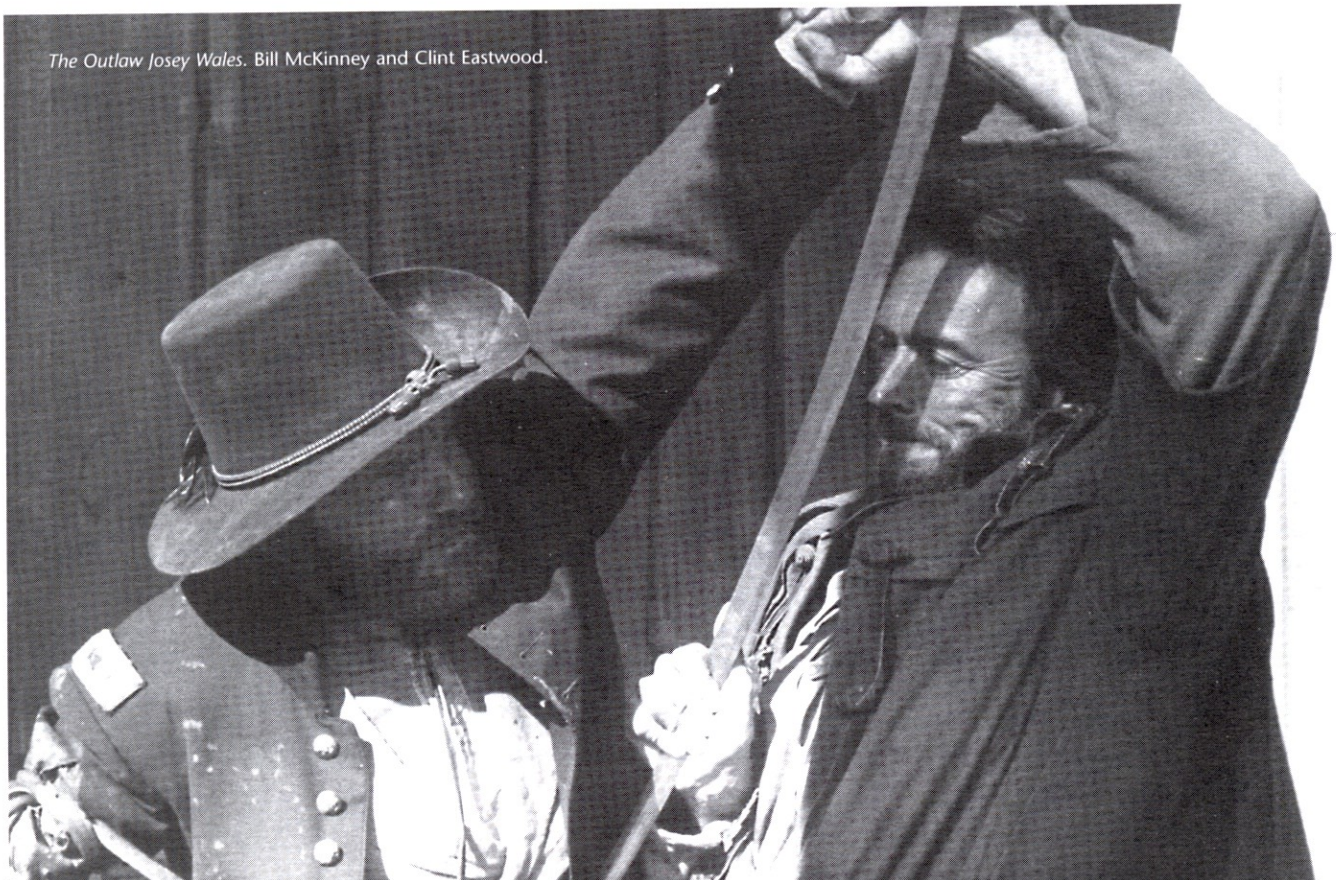
know you're going to look awful silly with that knife sticking up your ass"). The Drifter kills Cole/Anthony James (the most sadistic of Duncan's murderers) while silhouetted by flames, whipping Cole to death as Cole whimpers and begs for mercy. Stacey Bridges hears Duncan's dying plea of "Help me" echoing through the burning town during his final shoot-out with the Drifter. This final sequence of the film depicts a direct realization of the original curse that Duncan put on the town as he died. The Drifter metaphorically transforms Lago into Hell while burning the town to the ground and dismantling the mining company by attrition.

The Drifter represents Duncan's specter and alter ego. From what we see of Duncan he is clean-shaven, brightly dressed, and conducts himself according to law. The Drifter has a scruffy beard, is darkly dressed, and feels no restriction from inflicting harm when necessary. The murder of Duncan is connected to the marginalization of Mordecai (a dwarf who is frequently subjected to the disdain of and intimidation by the town's elite) and Sara Belding/Verna Bloom by the film's second flashback sequence. This sequence is depicted from Mordecai's perspective as he recalls hiding under a porch, not participating in the communal murder. We are also shown Sara frustrated in an attempt to save Duncan. Throughout the film, Mordecai enjoys the protection and empowerment of the Drifter, and protects the Drifter during the final shoot-out. Sara Belding through the course of the film represents a silenced figure of objective morality, equally appalled at the violence of Duncan's murder and that of the Drifter's methods. After recognizing that the Drifter is the ghost of Duncan, Sara leaves her hypocritical marriage to Belding/Ted Hartley. (The Drifter also gives candy and blankets to the First Nations people in the general store, and protects the Mexicans from Belding and Bridges.)

The ability of the town to function is dismantled by the Drifter, on a practical level by attrition, and on an ideological level by the Drifter's revelation of the hypocrisy underlying the community. Callie's assertion of her supposed moral superiority to the Drifter and to the towns' elite is later undermined by the revelation that she has slept with both Morgan Allen/Jack Ging and Stacey Bridges, and is willing to sleep with anyone she finds powerful. (Similarly, and humorously, she arrives in her best dress when invited to dinner by the Drifter, but again belies the image she attempts to project by displaying atrocious table manners.) When the Preacher/Robert Donner tells the Drifter that ordering everyone out of the hotel is unethical as "We are all brothers in the eyes of God", the Drifter points out that the Preacher shouldn't mind taking these people back to his house if he feels they are part of his family. The Preacher stands in front of the crowd and volunteers to do this, assuring them that "It won't cost you more than regular hotel rates". The Drifter consistently draws attention to contradictions in the recollections of the townspeople, revealing their hypocrisy, cowardice and self-serving behavior. When Sara tells him "Be careful, you're a man that makes people afraid and that's dangerous", he responds, "Well, it's what people know about themselves inside that makes them afraid".

*High Plains Drifter* presents a vision of a social unit that disintegrates due to the corrupt practices upon which its façade of respectability and integrity are built. Released in 1973, this film spoke to an audience that had just experienced a decade of violent social unrest on its home territory, and was in the midst of experiencing both the Vietnam War (which had little popular support and which, through the media, brought disturbing images of carnage and violence into the audience's daily lives) and the Watergate scandal (a widely reported investigation into

*The Outlaw Josey Wales.* Bill McKinney and Clint Eastwood.





the deeply entrenched practices of what had been supposed to be a democratic form of government acting in the interests of the electorate). Presented in this context, *High Plains Drifter* mirrored in its microcosm the larger tensions of the era that produced it.

### **The Outlaw Josey Wales**

The pastoral images that open this film are quickly disrupted by the pre-credit sequence depicting the murder of Josey's/Clint Eastwood's family by the blood-thirsty Red-Legs (Union soldiers nominally acting under the orders of the government, but who are far more motivated by the desire to pillage and rape rather than by any sense of patriotism). This atrocity recurs when Josey's comrades-at-arms are murdered by the same Red-Legs – who (under direct orders from the Senator) fire on unarmed men as part of an agenda to silence voices of dissent and curtail residual guerilla activity at the close of the Civil War. Josey's status as an outlaw is arbitrarily foisted on him by a dominant social order that lacks any credibility. Josey consistently fires only when first drawn upon. When presented with a clear opportunity to kill all of the soldiers in pursuit of him he fires a shot that severs the ferry's tow-cable, ensuring his own safety without physically harming anyone. Josey's reputation as a cold-blooded killer stems from a slander campaign created to put bounty hunters on his trail (in addition to the officers of the law that harass him) and to make it difficult for him to remain in hiding. Ironically, the Red-Legs slander Josey by falsely accusing him of their own crimes.

Josey's face is slashed in a manner that resembles the Mark of Cain during the pre-credit sequence, representing another level of irony (Cain is the original murderer whereas Josey is a peaceful homesteader attempting to protect his family from an unprovoked assault). Josey buries his wife and child, reciting "Ashes to ashes, Dust to dust, The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away". He begins to sob heavily and slumps over the cross he is putting at the head of his family's grave, breaking it as he pulls it down to the ground. He then retrieves his unused pistol from the ruins of his home and joins the guerilla regiment, motivated by desire to avenge the death of his family. Josey's later eulogy for Jamie/Sam Bottoms entirely neglects the concept of submission to the divine will and instead stresses the importance of Jamie's identity and their friendship – "This boy was brought up in the time of blood and dyin' and never questioned a bit of it. Never turned his back on his folks or his kind. I rode with him. I got no complaints." The first half of the film depicts Josey in a process of redefining his identity outside of the ideological constraints that define him.

Josey makes his way south affiliating with other representatives of marginalized groups. Speaking to Josey of the White Man, Lone Watie/Chief Dan George states " ... they took away our land and sent us here. I had a fine woman, and two sons, but they all died on the trail of tears, and now a white man is sneaking up on me again". Josey's reply is "Seems like we can't trust the white man". Although white by birth, Josey's experience of oppression is similar to Lone Watie's. Little Moonlight/Geraldine Keams(a Navajo woman who was rejected by her own tribe for not "resisting enough" during a forcible

rape – despite the fact that she was outnumbered and physically overpowered) is physically abused by a white man until Josey frees her. Grandma Sara/Paula Trueman initially praises the Red-Legs and speaks disparagingly of Josey and First Nations people, but eventually forms a cooperative farming society in which Josey and Lone Watie are offered partnerships and defends Josey from the Red-Legs at the film's climax. The group that forms around Josey seems to generate its social identity from a principle of inclusion (opposing viewpoints and lifestyles are respected) as opposed to the principle of exclusion that characterizes the belief systems of those associated with the Union and the Army (opposing viewpoints and lifestyles are not tolerated).

Josey strikes a treaty with the Comanche by appealing to Ten Bears on the basis of their common experience, stating: "Governments don't live together, people live together. With governments you don't always get a fair word or fair fight, well, I've come here to give you either one, or get either one from you." The methods of defense that Josey instructs the collective to utilize against the potential threat from the Comanche are actually used by the collective to defend Josey during the final shoot-out with the Red-Legs. (Josey is knocked off his horse and therefore at the mercy of the Red-Legs as his skills as a guerilla fighter require that he be able to ride.) Josey kills Captain Terrill/Bill McKinney by turning Terrill's own sword (which had originally slashed Josey's face) on Terrill (wearing the same facial expression as he had when slaughtering Josey's family), allowing Josey to recapitulate the initial atrocity and to turn the violence back upon its source. Rose/Joyce Jameson then swears an affidavit stating Josey has been killed, protecting him from further harassment. Fletcher/John Vernon, who had been forced to aid Terrill in the hunt for Josey (in order to protect himself from Josey's retribution for his unwitting part in the massacre of the guerilla regiment) capitulates to Josey at the film's conclusion by offering Josey an opportunity to fire on him, stating, "... the war is over." Josey replies, "I reckon so", and rides away.

*The Outlaw Josey Wales* was released in the U.S. bicentennial year, which seems both timely and ironic as this film is largely concerned with issues of national identity. The Civil War is thought by many historians to be a defining event in the evolution of American culture. This film, released in a year of celebration, is concerned with people who were displaced by the reformation of American society which the Civil War initiated. The collective society that is formed by the film's conclusion is one in which national identity has no meaning. (The irrelevance of race as a criterion for membership in the collective farm here is reminiscent of Penn's portrayal of the "counter-culture" collective in *Alice's Restaurant*). In parallel scenes, Grandma Sara and Lone Watie reject their respective personal identities as "pale faces" or "red skins" humorously, just as Josey has aligned himself to Lone Watie by verbally rejecting his identity as "the white man" (an identity further rejected when Josey and Ten Bears become blood brothers).

### **Pale Rider**

Although often criticized as being an attempt to exploit *Shane*, *Pale Rider* attempts to rethink *Shane* through deliberate contrasts with the George Stevens film. The action of the film





*Pale Rider* (1985)

begins with a raid on a small collective community comprised of miners who hold individual land claims. The raid is commissioned by Coy LaHood/Richard Dysart, the owner of a strip-mining company who, believing the miners' land claims to be valuable, attempts to seize control of the land by intimidating the miners. (As long as nobody is actually killed during the raids there is nothing that the law can do to stop them). The miners are also beaten by Lahood's thugs whenever they go into town to purchase supplies. The mining community is deteriorating under the weight of Lahood's harassment – several of the miners have already abandoned their claims. (Lahood's strip mining operation is also environmentally destructive—where Barrett/Michael Moriarty refuses to dynamite a boulder for fear of accidentally blocking the natural stream, LaHood later blocks the stream in order to deprive the mining community of water, regardless of environmental impact.)

Megan/Sydney Penny prays over her dog's grave in formal accordance with the religious structure of the community while asserting her own belief that the situation is hopeless ("The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, *but I do want*, ... though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, *but I am afraid...*"). The arrival of the Preacher/Clint Eastwood, is connected to her revision of the psalm through a series of dissolves. The Preacher is a supernatural figure, probably the ghost of someone murdered by Marshall Stockburn/John Russell. (The scars on the Preacher's back mirror the pattern of bullet holes that the Preacher shoots into Stockburn during the final shoot out). He also conveniently appears out of nowhere at crucial points in the film (eg: when Barrett is beaten by Lahood's thugs or when Josh LaHood/Christopher Penn attempts to rape Megan). The dualism of the Preacher's nature is stressed when he leaves to exchange his clerical collar for his gun belt. The Preacher also uses lethal force only when necessary (he shoots Josh's gun out of his hand, and fires another warning shot before shooting Josh through the hand).

Although the mining community unites on the issuing of opposing LaHood's corporate agenda, its viability as an alternative social order is called into question by interpersonal tensions that threaten to destroy it. Where Barrett's speech evokes a desire for stability and connection to traditional values ("I came out here to raise a family, this is my home, this is my dream. And we all buried members of our families in this ground, and this is their dream too and they died for it") the arrival of the Preacher stirs up many conflicting emotions that are also inherent in family life. *Shane* presents Joey/Brandon DeWilde as unaware of the potential love triangle developing between Shane/Alan Ladd, Joe Starrett/Van Heflin, and Marian Starrett/Jean Arthur, but Megan is directly involved in the love quadrangle between herself, Sarah/Carrie Snodgrass, the Preacher, and Barrett, and is in sexual competition with her mother for the attentions of the Preacher. Marian and Shane never act on their attraction for one another, but the Preacher and Sarah sleep together on the night before the final shoot-out, despite the fact the Sarah is already engaged to Barrett.

*Pale Rider* also creates meaning by restaging *Shane's* depic-



tion of the murder of Tory/Elisha Cook Jr. In the earlier film, Tory is goaded by Wilson/Jack Palance into drawing his weapon, and killed with no more effort than Wilson might give to swatting a fly, giving the viewer the impression of Wilson as a mythical figure who can be considered Shane's equal as a gunfighter. The murder of Spider/Doug McGrath by Stockburn and his deputies is physically staged in a similar manner, though Stockburn and his six deputies first terrorize Spider by shooting at his feet until Spider, out of sheer terror, reaches for his gun. All seven men then riddle Spider with dozens of bullets, taking pleasure in Spider's agony as they murder him. Their excessive behavior stems from cowardice and represents the unequal and unfair application of lethal force to anyone who opposes the corporate agenda, which is entirely based on a profit motive. Stockburn murders under the direction of the highest bidder he can find. In a social system dominated by corporate enterprise, that bidder will invariably represent the interests of privilege and concentration of wealth.

*Pale Rider* is the least satisfying of Eastwood's four westerns, a situation probably caused by Eastwood's decision to closely emulate the work of a vastly inferior filmmaker. In committing to a rethinking of *Shane*, Eastwood and his collaborators drastically limited the scope of their vision in constructing this work. This is unfortunate for two reasons. Firstly, in the few instances where the decision to rethink *Shane* does work well, the results are striking. I have already mentioned the horror of the murder of Spider in *Pale Rider* as compared to the shock of the murder of Tory in *Shane*. Another striking moment occurs at the conclusion of *Pale Rider* when Megan, like Joey in *Shane*, runs after the Preacher begging him to come back. Where Joey had called "Mother needs you" after Shane Megan calls "I love you". The predominant emotion of this scene seems to be emptiness, as opposed to the overblown melodrama which concludes *Shane*. Secondly, *Pale Rider* is in many ways the most interesting of Eastwood's four westerns. Released in 1985, this film links monopoly capitalism to the marginalization of smaller businesses (LaHood's uses a combination of legal and illegal means to force the miners out of business), damage to the environment (LaHood's uses strip mining technology and uses explosives to block the stream) and violence against women (Josh LaHood attempts to rape Megan, aided by some of the miners) at a time when the conservative backlash of the 1980's (the era of the "yuppie") was at its most virulent. The film is also remarkably astute in its presentation of the dysfunctional family unit, and in its presentation of the ambivalence of interpersonal relationships (the Preacher undoubtedly respects and admires Barrett—but sleeps with Sarah; Megan undoubtedly loves both the Preacher and her mother—but aligns herself with Josh LaHood out of anger when the Preacher rejects her as a sexual partner in favor of her mother).

### Unforgiven

Delilah/Anna Thomson is mutilated by Quick Mike/David Mucci in retribution for giggling upon her discovery that he has a small penis. Quick Mike's punishment of her transgression—scarring her in order to make her sexually unattractive—

establishes that Big Whiskey is a community in which women exist only to sexually service men. Skinny's/Anthony James's complaint that he has a contract for Delilah's services renders the issue as one of property in Little Bill's/Gene Hackman's mind, regardless of Delilah's pain and suffering. Both Little Bill and Skinny agree that the best punishment for the crime is a repayment of ponies to Skinny, thereby systemically endorsing Quick Mike's treatment of Delilah. The oppression of women in Big Whiskey is also later connected to the oppression of visible minority groups through Little Bill's whipping of Ned/Morgan Freeman, and by the arrival of English Bob/Richard Harris, who is paid by the railroad to murder impoverished Chinese immigrants who stow away on trains. The women of Big Whiskey, in attempting to find bounty hunters to redress the crime, are asserting their worth in an oppressive system that denies it.

English Bob calls for a plague on the town as he is driven away in handcuffs. Will/Clint Eastwood is connected to English Bob when he glances at the English man riding away on the train. After being beaten by Little Bill, Will awakens from his delirium and mistakes Delilah for an angel. Will and Delilah are the only characters in the film who manage to form an emotional connection based on affiliation, as opposed to exploitation. Delilah and Will are connected thematically as they both represent dualistic characters; she is beautiful but scarred, gentle but a focal point for violence, naïve (giggling at a small penis) but a prostitute. Will is a devoted family man but also a ruthless killer, and the physical scarring of Will's face recalls Delilah's scarring. Will's decision to avenge Ned coincides with his drinking a bottle of whiskey, which literally represents a reversion to his former alcoholism but which thematically represents the sacrament of communion. Will is clearly associated with the image of the Angel of Death that had previously terrified him as he rides into town on a pale horse and enters Greely's accompanied by a thunderclap.

The whores are Big Whiskey's most consistently marginalized characters, even their efforts to redress Delilah's mutilation bring more violence upon them (Strawberry Alice/Frances Fisher is beaten by Skinny when he learns of the bounty and Little Bill later slaps Alice while questioning her about the whereabouts of Ned and the Schofield Kid/Jaimz Woolvet). Although the whipping of Ned aligns Big Whiskey with the oppression of persons of color (Ned is whipped to death for his participation in a crime, whereas Davey and Quick Mike are merely fined), Ned unwittingly participates in this system of oppression. Ostensibly in town to avenge the mutilation of Delilah, Ned and the Schofield Kid take sexual favors from the women as advances on their payment for the murders, affirming the relegation of these women to the position of sex objects. The social system of Big Whiskey remains entrenched by encouraging even the traditionally oppressed to oppress women. (Ned is also thematically linked to the marginalization of First Nations people through his infidelity to Sally/Cherrilene Cardina and by ignoring Sally's wish that he not accompany Will to Big Whiskey.)

Will kills Little Bill and his entourage, leaving only Deputy Andy Russell/Jeremy Ratchford (a coward who will not fire on



Will fearing retaliation), Beauchamp/Saul Rubinek (a coward who urinates in his pants when threatened, and a manufacturer of romanticized fictions which mythologize the violence around him), and the whores to witness his departure. Will's parting harangue (delivered with the American flag as a backdrop) "You better bury Ned right, you better not cut up nor otherwise harm no whores, or I'll come back and kill every one of you sons of bitches" seems at first a final affirmation of the rights of the town's marginalized peoples. However, although the townspeople were not supportive of Little Bill's domination by violent means (they are blatantly appalled by him at several points in the film) they allowed him to continue unchecked for fear of violent reprisal, either by Little Bill or by the loss of their protection from outside criminal elements. Although Will uses violence to redress specific wrongs, whereas Little Bill uses violence to assert his own ego, Will's dismantling of the town's social system can be seen as unwittingly reaffirming the system of social control by threat of violence that Little Bill had utilized.

In addition to *Bird*, *Unforgiven* deserves to be recognized as Eastwood's masterpiece. In a previous article ("Rewriting Revisionism: Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*", *CineAction* 46: 56-63) I discussed how *Unforgiven*, in its presentation of the ambiguity of the moral distinctions between its protagonist and its antagonist seemed to be indicative of a new critical stance in American mainstream films (many critics now use the term "new cinema" to discuss how this trend has manifested itself over the last decade). Relatively few critics seem to have noticed that *Unforgiven* is also one of the first popular mainstream films to blatantly incorporate meta-textual/meta-theatrical motifs in its criticism of the romanticized mythologization of the culture of violence that the film presents (The elegant textual interpolations that prologue and epilogue the action of the film might well have been written by Beauchamp itself – the film therefore uses the medium of Classical Western mythology as part of its critique of same). Many critics have noticed that the film, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture (among others) in the International Year of Women, is deeply concerned with the position of women in patriarchal capitalism, and is very sympathetic to the dilemma that women face in order to survive and live with dignity. It is entirely fitting that the final images of the main action of *Unforgiven* are those of Will as he vanishes into the rain intercut with Delilah in tears at his simultaneous defense of her and affirmation of the world that has mutilated and which continues to threaten her.

• • •

According to Garry Watson ("The Western: The Genre that Engenders the Nation", *CineAction* 46: 2-10.), the Classical Western dramatizes the regeneration of the community through the sacrifice of a character who, although alienated from the community, redeems it while purging it of "impure violence" (2). Eastwood's four revisionist Westerns, although very different in their intents from the examples that Watson cites, similarly create meaning by relating their social agendas to traditional myths of regeneration. Richard Lippe has suggested that Eastwood's conflation of the Gunslinger icon with

an icon associated with social stability (Marshal, Farmer, Preacher, Loving Husband and Father) represents a "phoenix-like" re-emergence of the Gunslinger to avenge the vicious beating or murder of his previous incarnation, the initiating act of violence being revisited upon the perpetrators by the Gunslinger.

The religious motifs that accompany re-emergence of Eastwood's character tend to align Eastwood's character with what Watson refers to as "the sacred" (10). Watson further describes "the sacred" "...as a contradictory double-sided phenomenon, on the one side blessed, beautiful, pure, and peaceful, on the other, accursed, terrible, impure, and violent" (10). Similarly, Eastwood dramatizes the problem of violence in the dominant social order as unresolved. Where the Classical Western presents the community as transformed to a "state of grace" at its resolution, Eastwood presents the community as simply dismantled at the climax of each of his four Westerns, with no clear alternative presented. (Lago is burnt to the ground, the crosses on the windows of the collective farm seem to thematically render it as a place of sanctuary rather than an alternative community, the mining community is rife with interpersonal conflict, and Big Whiskey continues under the threat of Will's violence after Little Bill is murdered.) The violence in Eastwood's four Westerns is always generated from inside the community – the initiating act reinforces the dominant social order, and is visited back upon the community by a former member avenging his marginalization. However, in avenging the initiating act of violence, Eastwood's character is presented as motivated by the desire to address specific wrongs, whereas the motivation for the initiating act of violence is usually connected to self-interested or ego-assertive behavior. (For example, the deaths of the members of the Bridges gang in *High Plains Drifter* are certainly brutal, but completely lack the sadism of the murder of Duncan. Similarly, in *Unforgiven*, Will avenges Little Bill's sadistic murder of Ned simply by shooting Little Bill to death.) This links Eastwood's conflated persona to a tradition of mythical figures in American Culture who represent the dark, avenging side of "the sacred". (Moby Dick, although a monstrous character, is ultimately redressing Ahab's blasphemy – more recently, the *Batman* character in Tim Burton's two films is presented as clearly neurotic in his quest to "clean up the streets".) Although operating within the traditional mainstream, Eastwood never completely resolves the social issues addressed in these Westerns at the resolution of their plots. The community is not depicted as completely purged or redeemed, suggesting that the abuses of power which seem to threaten the community have also been intrinsic to its' development.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Jeff McQueen (for deflating my adolescent pomposity by convincing me that Clint Eastwood is, in fact, a very talented man), Monika Grenda (for helpful editorial suggestions), Katie Harris (who deprived the world of an excellent film critic by deciding to become a biologist) and Richard Lippe (for continued friendship and support). Considering the many years I spent studying the works of Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mordecai Richler, and Shakespeare, I find it ironic that I have become so fascinated with Clint Eastwood.



BOOK REVIEW

## Fred and Ginger: A Vision of Emersonian Hollywood?

By Jeffrey Crouse

**Astaire & Rogers**

**By Edward Gallafent, New York:  
Columbia University Press, 2002**

The turn of the new century has witnessed a body of remarkable texts within film studies that have directly engaged with, or been subtly informed by, aspects of Stanley Cavell's work. They include: Gilberto Perez's widely-hailed *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (1998), a searching meditation on the contradictory nature of cinema that springs from a lifetime of teaching and reflection; V. F. Perkins's 1999 BFI monograph of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, an indispensable reading of Welles's 1942 film; Andrew Klevan's *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Film* (2000, reviewed in *CineAction* 57), an exploration of ideas in Cavell's work that is as thrillingly inventive as it is richly illuminating; William Rothman and Marian Keane's *Reading The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (2000), a useful companion to that seminal 1971 book; Keane's wise and wondrous commentary tracks for the Criterion Collection's DVD releases of Sturges's 1941 *The Lady Eve* (2001) and Hitchcock's 1935 *The 39 Steps* and 1946 *Notorious* (1999 and 2001, respectively); and George Toles's *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of the Film* (2001) a text which, like these others, convincingly demonstrates how aesthetic and humanistic concerns continue to be vitally relevant in the experience of film watching. And though ultimately it cannot be placed on the level of these tours de force, another memorable composition has appeared within this tide of scholarship. Added to this catalog is Edward Gallafent's analysis of the achievements arising from the musicals featuring Hollywood's most iconic couple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Gallafent, the author of *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director* (1994) and contributor to this journal and member of the editorial board of *Movie*, has crafted a groundbreaking examination of the legendary screen



team. Near the start of *Astaire & Rogers* he states that he does not intend his book to offer a wider examination of the US musical in the manner of Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical* (1982) or Rick Altman's *The American Film Musical* (1989). Instead he concentrates on the 10 films starring the song-and-dance duo—plus those made by each performer individually in the decade-long gap between their ninth (*The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* [H. C. Potter, 1939]) and final effort (*The Barkleys of Broadway* [Charles Walters, 1949]). The originality of his analysis lies in his dual thesis: (1) that there is an intelligence operating in the narratives as well as the numbers of their films together; and (2) that these films consciously build upon intimate knowledge of each other, as do the movies released during the period of their work apart.

In this way, he grandly contests the "truism" that the plots of the Astaire-Rogers musicals are so flimsy and formulaic as to be interchangeable and only acquire distinction due to the unforgettable routines of waltz or tap and/or to the songs regarded as standards of twentieth-century popular music. Gallafent's reading of the series invites us to regard them as possessing a structural integrity. "One might say," as he declares, "that the dance sequences answer questions raised elsewhere and raise other questions which it will be the business of the film to answer." (pp. 6-7)

To demonstrate the validity of his claims, Gallafent first divides their joint films along two lines: the "dance team films" and "romances." In the former (e.g., *Roberta* [William A. Seiter, 1935] and *Follow*

*the Fleet* [Mark Sandrich, 1936]), the Astaire and Rogers characters have known one another before the story opens (meaning that they have danced together), and are paired with a second lead couple. In the latter (e.g., *The Gay Divorcée* [1934] and *Top Hat* [1935, both Sandrich]), the Astaire character encounters the Rogers figure for the first time and pursues her; the feelings generated in the private space of their dance are complicated by misunderstandings which are resolved by their dance within a public performance that closes the film; both are transported to another locale to work out their destiny; and there is no couple of parallel status present.

Themes such as the couple having to reconcile the public and private realms, the question of origins regarding the couple, and the existence of a "green world" for the man and woman to understand themselves so as to understand the other are all classic features of Cavell's attention. For these reasons, the films of Astaire and Rogers appear as natural subjects for Cavellian analysis. But it is, as Gallafent sees, the "deliberate interest in the changing possibilities of their world" (p. 8) as developed across their movies that makes them particularly suitable for examining a more underlying topic within Cavell's lines of interest: issues of self in relation to marriage. The unique achievement of the Astaire-Rogers RKO films nowadays tends to be obscured by a combination of the difficulty of viewing the entire cycle

in the way it was available to its original audiences and an understandable



admiration of the brilliance and verve of the dance numbers. But stand back far enough to see it, and the shape, and intelligence and seriousness are clear. The cycle is an opportunity to question what is understood by marriage, what constitutes the beginning or middle, or ending of one, and what conditions inform such encounters or farewells. (p. 100)

Nowhere is he more accomplished at distinguishing the points of variation employed by each film in asking what is understood by marriage than in his splendid discussion of *Swing Time* (George Stevens, 1936). As a rich synthesis of the dance team films and romances—indeed, I think, it earns a depth practically unknown in the series—the movie retains actors from *Top Hat* (Helen Broderick, Eric Blore), composer Jerome Kern and lyricist Dorothy Fields from *Roberta*, and the writer responsible for five of their musicals (Allan Scott), even as it displays alterations that open up possibilities for their world as a couple. Without suggesting that this list is an exhaustive treatment of his analysis of such prospects, he touches upon the following: the meaning of reversing the usual pattern of movement in the numbers so that the first dance (“Pick Yourself Up”) is set in a public space and the last in an intensely private one (“Never Gonna Dance”); the significance of removing the second couple in the romances but not the songs given to them (“The Way You Look Tonight” and “A Fine Romance” figure in ways not connected to introducing an Astaire and Rogers dance); the manner in which the couple in the romances going to another place to work things out is this time interrogated (“A Fine Romance”); and the rare, genuinely sympathetic attention directed towards the Rogers character (her forlorn agreement to marry the foreigner played by Georges Matata carries more weight than *Top Hat* counterpart Erik Rhodes ever mustered) leading Gallafent to write how in the final number “Stevens includes two shots of Rogers, alone on the stairs, framed by the stars, as if to insist on her status as central to what is being lost, and celebrated, here.” (p. 60) Importantly, he is perceptive in identifying the source of the film’s melancholy and the reason for the overdetermined round of laughter that closes it.

But it is the precise manner the Astaire figure moves in the world as seen in a film like *Top Hat*—“the climax of the Astaire-

Rogers musicals” (p. 33)—that is intimately tied to questions of self raised throughout Cavell’s work. Cavell observes in *The World Viewed* that Astaire possesses a resourcefulness that allows the world to dance to his music. As wholly accurate as that description is, it is precisely the dictatorial power implied in that statement that later writers (Arlene Croce, Pauline Kael, Robin Wood, and Richard Dyer) have observed in his partnership with Rogers. Rather than the qualities of give-and-take which define their relationship, what these critics find is a resist-and-surrender process in which she eventually cedes herself to him.

Building on their insights, I argue that Astaire’s seamless conjunction with the world, infinite consciousness leading to graceful skill, and thorough self-containedness render him so singular as to appear divine. Of the narcissism displayed by his celestial dandy, no aspect was more impressive yet more disguised than the way he restyles Rogers through dance. He controls their dances, his charm making her gradual surrender seem liberating even as she changes—not to become herself—but an extension of him. How different Astaire and Rogers are, then, from the glorious couples in the comedies of remarriage. Within that Hollywood genre Cavell sees a working out of the qualities of “Emersonian perfectionism,” namely, a moral vision in which women demand an image of their lives with men involving mutual education, transfiguration, and playfulness. He writes of the “essential” equality between the sexes here in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981) when discussing the “walls of Jericho” which separate the couple (Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable) until they come down at the end of Capra’s 1934 *It Happened One Night*:

I guess I would not place such emphasis on the possible ambiguity concerning who blows the trumpet apart from my taking this film as one defining the genre of the comedy of remarriage; for it is an essential feature of that genre, as I conceive it, to leave ambiguous the question whether man or woman is the active or passive partner, whether indeed active and passive are apt characterizations of the difference between male and female, or whether indeed we know satisfactorily how to think about the difference between male and female. This is why I said that this genre refuses the distinction between Old

Comedy and New Comedy, in the former of which the woman is dominant, in the latter the man. This is also a reason I have also called the genre the comedy of equality.

Seeing the Astaire and Rogers couple in more specific terms as being a *heterosexual* one, and thus operating along specific masculine and feminine arrangements (particularly as reflected in dance) would have enabled Gallafent to contrast the ways in which they do not qualify as a couple within this genre as well as he explains where they succeed. As viewed above, the nearest he comes to identifying the difference between the way each moves in the world resides in his reading of *Swing Time*. This is a primary reason why these pages stand out.

His discussion of “The Way You Look Tonight” is penetrating, but he robs his study of achieving greater impact because, as already mentioned, he otherwise scarcely engages with what is occurring in their relationship as seen in the numbers. *The subject is Fred and Ginger, no less.* (If the book’s second half is less compelling it is probably because their films made separately are often themselves less memorable. *Second Chorus* [Potter, 1940] or *Lady in the Dark* [Mitchell Leisen, 1944], anyone? This is especially true of Rogers whose acting in the Forties increasingly became, as James Harvey rightly notes, “unwatchably mannered and arch.”) Though this makes for an odd and frustratingly soft center, Gallafent’s book still deserves a special place in the scholarship on Astaire and Rogers. His reading of their films brims with insights, as, for instance, the way he charts the gradual loss of their green world at the end of the series, and his suggesting the real reason behind Rogers’s fury at being subjected to the public gaze in *Shall We Dance* (Sandrich, 1937). His production history research ably supports his twin arguments, and the stills found throughout are silver enchantments.

*Note: The title of this review is borrowed directly from a labor-of-love course William Rothman teaches at the University of Miami called Emersonian Hollywood.*

*Dr. Jeffrey Crouse heads the film program at Bishop Gorman College Preparatory High School in Las Vegas. A graduate of the University of Warwick, he is preparing a book on gender and sexuality in the classical Hollywood musical.*



## LETTERS

### To the editors of *CineAction*:

I have read with considerable pleasure Robin Wood's article on "Hollywood High School Movies of the 90s" in *CineAction* #58. Like Mr. Wood I have enjoyed a number of these movies, and feel the "generic cycle" as a whole merit serious analysis such as provided here. I agree about the special merits of *American Pie*, and I certainly will re-see *Can't Hardly Wait* and *She's All That* at an early opportunity. However in one respect I was disappointed and puzzled by the article. Mr. Wood lists *Bring It On* (dir. Peyton Reed) among the films he has seen—then says *not another word* about it, despite the fact that this film is surely (1) highly entertaining, (2) a significant step in the developing career of the admirable Kirsten Dunst (ably supported by Eliza Dushku and Jesse Bradford), and (3) quite relevant to the specific issues Mr. Wood raises in criticism of this group of films.

Concerning gender: Mr. Wood says "the films remain resolutely male-centered, the main action invariably initiated by the males." This is clearly untrue of *Bring It On*, in which Ms. Dunst's character Torrance Shipman (newly-elected captain of the prize-winning cheerleading team, who suddenly finds that her team's "championship" routines have in fact been stolen from another team) is clearly the film's center. Torrance remains the focus in the film's depiction of her boyfriend problems. Concerning race and class: Mr. Wood complains about an absence in these films of any sense of contemporary America's race and class tensions. In

*Bring It On* however race and class tensions are *absolutely central to the plot*—which concerns the competition and "bad blood" between two high school cheerleading squads, one composed mainly of well-off white suburbanites and the other from an overwhelmingly black/brown urban school whose imaginative choreography has gone unrecognized while the white team that copies them has regularly won national championships. (It is specified that the black school is so economically disadvantaged that its team cannot afford the entry fee to participate in national cheerleading contests.)

Concerning sexual orientation: Mr. Wood criticizes the lack of gay characters in the films. In fact *Bring It On* includes an openly and proudly gay male cheerleader who is both sympathetic and unstereotyped (admittedly his is a very small role)—and the film clearly disapproves of the homophobic football "jocks" who regularly taunt him. To repeat, I am quite puzzled at Mr. Wood analyzing this "cycle" but avoiding any discussion of the admirable *Bring It On*. What's the explanation?

Yours truly,  
Michael McKegney

PS—Not strictly part of this "cycle", but related, is Doug Liman's *Go* which (I hope Mr. Wood agrees) is really excellent—one of the best American movies of recent years.

### Robin Wood replies:

*Mea culpa...* I shall expiate my sins with a shocking confession, at risk of alienating my remaining seven fans. I only saw snatches of *Bring It On*. I had three guests to dinner, drank a lot of wine, set up the film, dozed through much of it, receiving only a generalized sense of hectic energy. Afterwards I asked my guests what they thought, and they were unanimous in informing me that it wasn't worth seeing (but they had little or no interest in high school comedies). I have on occasion accused other critics of irresponsibility, but my sin is worse than theirs. Everything Mr. McKegney says is correct: *Bring It On* is an admirable film, among the very best of the cycle, wonderfully acted and directed and very strong on politics. My article is to be reprinted in a new edition of my book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (with *and beyond* added to the title), and I have added an enthusiastic paragraph on this film.

—Robin Wood



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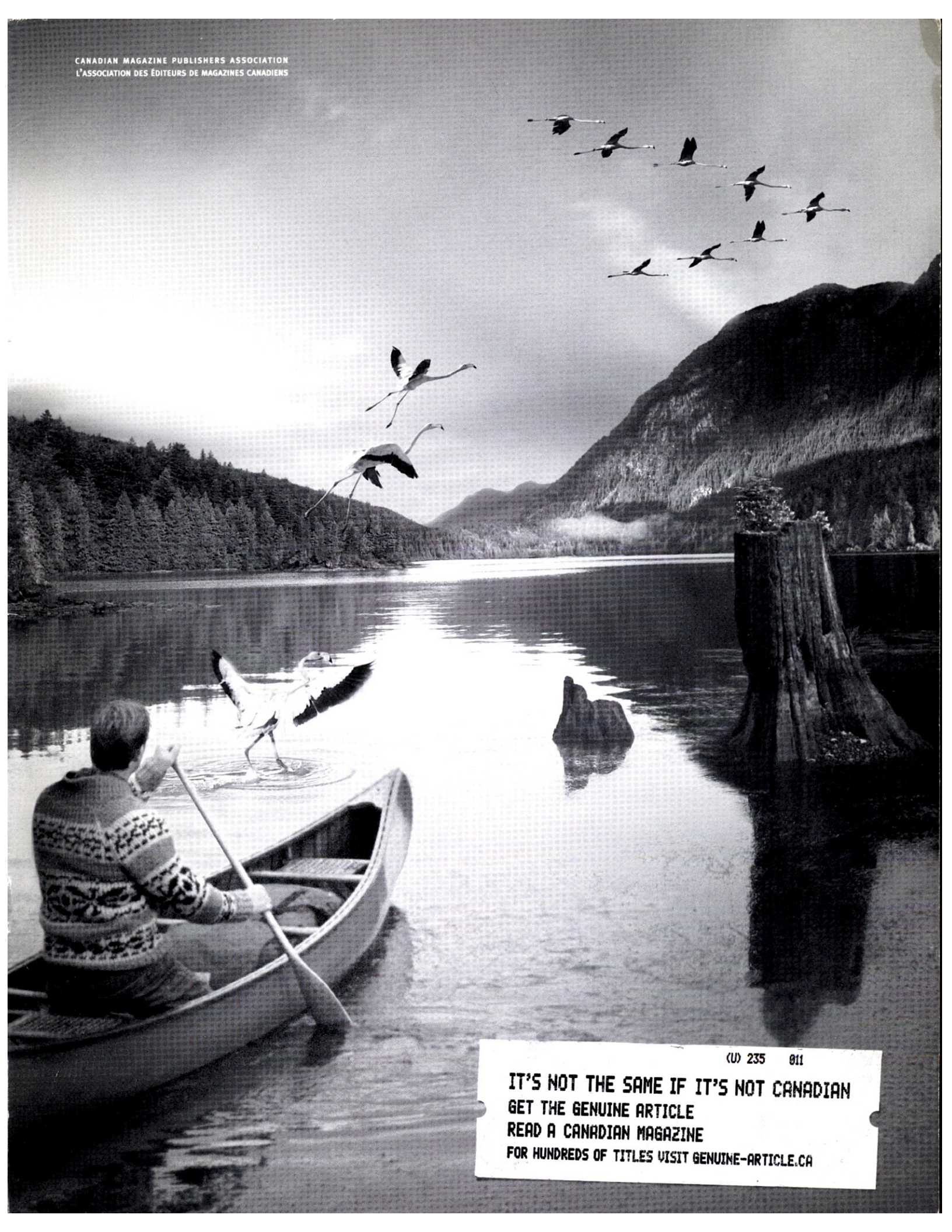
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